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THE SPORT OF CHANCE.

VOL. I.

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HURST & BLACKETT, 13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

THE SPORT OF CHANCE

BY

WILLIAM SHARP

“Hither and thither blown, the sport of Chance.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON :
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

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THEODORE WATTS

POET—ROMANCIST—CRITIC,

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THE SPORT OF CHANCE.

PROLOGUE.

WHAT HAPPENED OFF CONGER COVE.

THE sea was rising in wild tumult along the western coast of Cornwall, and nowhere was its rage more violent than against the slightly indented, horse-shoe-shaped inlet, known as Conger Cove. When, in fine weather, any boat northward bound passed near Conger Cove, the latter looked like a mere inland curve, or, at low tide and with a dead calm, like a gigantic mouth wherein appeared as teeth the jagged reefs fringing with a strange regularity the mass of rock which forms a semicircular wall against

the advance of the sea. From the cliffs behind one could see how this slit gradually widens into a small narrow harbour, in which by day are generally anchored some twenty to thirty mackerel boats, and at whose upper end cluster the houses of the village of St. Aphra. But when the sea is high this narrow opening is almost invisible to those looking landward, owing to the clouds of spray which are incessantly tossed up round the mouth-like cove; and absolutely so when on a wintry twilight not even a glimmer of light shines across the waves from the inhospitable coast.

And a wintry twilight it was when the Great Storm, as the Cornish fishermen long continued to speak of it, began to develop from a furious gale into a hurricane.

To the right the Beacon Cliff loomed dimly against the western sky, which still maintained an ominous hue of purple-black quite distinct from the intense darkness swiftly spreading everywhere, as if invisible powers were drawing from the eastward a pall of impermeable gloom. The thunder had ceased, or, if it had

not ceased, its sound was overwhelmed in the tumult of the tempest. For a moment the clouds parted far out at sea, and a single star shone forth like a ray of hope. Then it seemed literally blown out, for immediately the clouds became indivisible blackness again; and by a strange coincidence a fiery meteor flashed as it fell from the very point where the star had disclosed itself—as if the latter, swept from its orbit, were hurtling into space.

The morning preceding the eve of the Great Storm had broken with a wild, but as yet fitful, gale. Hours before dawn the smacks had run in from the sea, each fisherman knowing that no ordinary tempest was brewing, and that its fury might at any moment break forth and destroy them and their boats. All day the wind had blown with great force, gradually increasing till it became a tempest. The men of St. Aphra lounged about in an aimless way, though some still slept after the toilsome efforts of the preceding night and early morning; whilst most of those who were about kept uneasily glancing towards Conger Cove, where the smacks were rising

and falling on the heavy swell that surged in at the entrance of the tiny harbour.

When the sun set that afternoon, it foreboded further change for the worse. A small group of men had strolled down to the outer end of the 'Slice,' but even at that early time in the tempest's growing fury they were half-blinded by the spray. When they returned to the Ferry Rocks they were joined by Garth Trendall. The Trendalls had always been a silent race, seldom speaking unless spoken to, and then only to the point; and though Garth was among the most prosperous, and was certainly the most respected, of the fishermen of his native place, he was hardly what could be called popular. While few of the younger men cared much for the companionship on land of Garth Trendall, everyone trusted and respected him. The old and the poor trusted him; those more immediately associated with him in his daily labour knew that no man was his equal in any dangerous emergency; and that if he had more moral strength, he had also more determination—in a word, more virility than any

two men in St. Aphra. Married, his wife Mary was in every way a fitting mate—cheerful, active, and full of kindness, and only regretful because that her buxom maturity was blessed with only one child, a lad of some ten years.

When Trendall reached the group of men at the Ferry Rocks, the latter saw at once he had come with a purpose, probably with some suggestion as to the safety of their boats. A tall man, with grizzled hair, somewhat worn face, slightly aquiline nose, and piercing grey-blue eyes, he had an unmistakable individuality that in any small community would at once have marked him out.

‘Men, this is going to be the worst gale seen by living man on the Cornish coast. There’ll be more lives lost to-night than in a week of ordinary storms.’

‘It’s a true word, it is,’ said one of the men.

‘There’ll be neither moon nor stars seen to-night,’ resumed Trendall.

A pause succeeded, during which the men

looked uneasily at one another. Evidently some doubt, perhaps the same surmise, had entered into each of their minds. Startling all amid this hesitating silence came a sudden flash of intense light, followed by a deep, booming roll of thunder. The men turned to gain their separate shelters, as if there were nothing more to be said.

All except Trendall. He stood still, while a brief look of scorn flashed across his face.

‘Men,’ he cried, ‘wait a bit. I’ve summut to say to ye. Ye needn’t hurry. The lightning’s miles away yet, and there’s no rain with this wind.’

The six or eight fishermen halted, two of them with more marked reluctance than the others, and it was to these two that the next words were addressed.

‘You, Matthew Webb, and you, Richard Trego, know what I’m goin’ to say. I hope you were hurrying away to tell your wives you’re goin’ to help your fellow-men to-night. Yes, men—you, Ned Pennell, you, Jarvis, you, Jack Trenergy—all of you—I speak to you as men, and

brave men ! who will come with me and help to raise the warning to-night on the Beacon Cliff ? It's a matter of life and death, men,' he went on, speaking more rapidly, and even fiercely, as if he expected instant expostulation—'a matter of life and death ! Do you hear me, you ? Do not turn away like that. May the hand of God press heavy on the heart of any man here who refuses his help this wild night !'

'You're a good man, Garth Trendall, but you don't know what you're saying. What living man in his senses would venture on to the Beacon to-night, let alone the fact that worse is coming ! Could a strong man walk along the edge of the cliff just now, reckon ye ? Yet you yourself said a minute ago that this was going to be the worst night any of us had ever seen on the coasts.'

The man who spoke was John Trendall, a cousin of Garth. His words were followed by a murmured sound of approval from the other men, excepting Trego.

'Garth,' said the latter, 'you know I would do what I could to help you, even if you

wasn't my mate. But what can you or I, or a dozen of us, do to-night? Even if we could gain the beacon in the black darkness, what warning fire would the wind let be?

‘A single flash might save a ship, Richard.’

At this moment—for during the last few minutes there had been a comparative lull—the wind increased in volume, and broke upon the little group with terrific force. There was a noise in the air as if a thousand windmills were whirling it into a chaos of tumult. The men staggered as drunkards do when, coming out of the blaze of the gin-palace, they find themselves in darkness filled with rain and the noise of street traffic. Even Garth Trendall was stunned and dazed by the lightning and the dreadful crash of the thunder. When he spoke again, he found he had but one man for audience. All had hastily disappeared, leaving Trego alone with his friend.

‘I will come with you, Garth,’ said the man; ‘but God help us!’

‘If you fear God’s not helping us, Richard Trego, stay at home. If not, what need have you to fear anything?’

An hour later the two men had gained the summit of the Beacon. Their strength had been tasked to the utmost, for at times the path was almost on the ledge of the steep ascent, and they had to cling to it to prevent their being blown back or over it. At last the summit was reached. Some twelve yards from the ledge was a short wall of solid stone, chiefly natural, but partly artificial. Behind this, safely deposited, were always kept logs of tarred wood, matches, a huge pot of pitch, and other material of the kind. The wall was so constructed as to afford shelter from the south-west, west, and north-west to any beacon that might be lit; and by the time that flames would tower above the wall, small as it was, there was little chance that even an unusually fierce tempest would be able to beat it out. Yet never was it lit with such difficulty as on this night, even though little rain fell on the kindled brushwood; such rain as there was being swept along in an almost absolute level, as if it were born of the sea rather than of the tempestuous clouds above. Still the wind grew. It was now a hurricane, and

one that England had long bitter cause to remember. At times the two men, away from the shelter of the wall, gasped for air, or rather with excess of it; if they had thought of such a thing at all, they might have realised what manner of death it is that the fish dies when taken out of its natural element. In a shout that was as a fleeting whisper, Trego cried out,

‘My God! Trendall, the wind will blow the souls out of our bodies. The cliff slopes to a hollow two or three hundred yards inland; let’s make for it while we can!’

For a moment the man spoken to was tempted. The flames had at last given sufficient message far seaward. Would it be safe to leave them? His visible uncertainty decided Trego, who, stooping and staggering, half ran and was half blown out of the flame-lit gloom into the outer darkness. Throwing on more logs, each dipped in pitch, Trendall prepared to follow. He had gone but a few yards when he was struck to the ground as if by the stroke of a gigantic wing—as, indeed, he was—by the wing of the

Angel of Tempest. As he fell he heard a crash. He was not hurt, or stricken by lightning, only mowed down by the wind; and, as he looked about him in a sudden great dread, he saw the last embers of the beacon whirled away into the darkness like masses and flakes of fiery snow. No hope now of lighting another beacon, for that crash had been the falling in of the upper part of the wall. Nor could the man rise and flee inland as his comrade had done, for the course of the central current of the hurricane had shifted a point or two to the west, and as effectually cut off his flight in the perilous darkness as if a wall of stone had intervened.

Then came the sudden opening in the clouds, disclosing the single star; then the falling of the fiery meteor, luridly lighting up for a moment the wild sea.

But it was not the gleam of the meteor that made Garth Trendall spring to his feet for the brief moment ere he was again dashed to the ground. What he saw in the vanishing light was a ship wildly rushing before the

awful gale—rushing, as he knew, to what was inevitable destruction. In less than half an hour—in an even briefer space—all that would be left of the vessel would be a mass of riven timbers surging to and fro amidst the teeth-like reefs of Conger Cove.

Garth Trendall never knew how he reached St. Aphra that night. Men have been known to climb steeples, to reach swaying mast-heads, to do a dozen daring things as somnambulists—accomplishing in their sleep what would be impossible to them when awake. Somehow he reached the base of the cliff in safety, and with a speed excelling that in which he could have done the feat in the broad light of a calm day.

When he reached the base of the Beacon Cliff he sank exhausted on the ground, but only for a few moments. Drenched with the showers of salt spray which dashed over him as he lay at the mouth of the Slice, he was at the same time revived thereby; so that, shaking himself like some great dog, he bounded to his feet again, and ere long reached the village. He had little

need, however, to rouse the fishermen. What man, woman, or child could sleep through that awful night, when every moment the thunder of the sea seemed to come nearer, and the roaring and violence of the wind to become more terrible?

A group of some twenty men stood under the shelter of Trendall's house. All were gloomily anxious about the two missing men, for none had seen the warning fire during the few minutes it had blazed up, and they naturally supposed that Trendall and Trego had found the ascent impossible. Why, then, had they not returned? What did it mean? That last terrible lightning flash, what had it done?

When old Ivo Marshall shouted out, 'The wind's more to the west'ard, and it'll sweep the path along the ledge like a scythe,' every man there knew what he meant. If this surmise were true, they knew what two shapeless things were at this moment being churned against the mutilating rocks which rise through the furious trough of the sea below the Beacon.

At this moment Garth Trendall flew past them, unobservant in the darkness and his haste that a group of dark figures was standing at one side of his house. Haggard, drenched, and with marks of blood on his face, no wonder he was mistaken for his ghost, and that a cry of horror rose from the fishermen. Garth Trendall was dead, and his flying and affrighted spirit had rushed past them as a warning of worse evils to come! A sudden scream rang above the fury of the gale, and the men, not knowing that it came from Mary Trendall as her husband hurled back the door of his cottage, would have become wholly demoralised had not old Ivo Marshall recognised his daughter's voice, and seen the sudden gleam of light issue from the opened door, thus guessing that his son-in-law had returned in the flesh and not in the spirit.

Even while he shouted his assurances to the men, the door again rapidly opened, and Garth was in their midst.

‘Men, from the top o’ the Beacon I saw a ship driving straight to destruction. She’ll be

across the Conger Rocks any moment now. You won't refuse to follow me now, men, after what I've done to-night? For God's sake, come with me at once to the mouth of the Slice. The ship's doomed, but in God's mercy some poor souls may be washed within our reach. There's rope and to spare at Webb's cottage. You'll come, men ?'

Whether the speaker's determined spirit animated each man there, or that the danger imminent to the whole village touched their hearts to a sudden enthusiasm, there was not one dissentient voice among them.

Forcing their way against the gale, they reached the shelter of the Beacon Cliff, which here rose abruptly from the shore. They were not a moment too soon. A flame-coloured rocket sprang [up in front of them, and they caught a glimpse of a never-to-be-forgotten scene.

Yes, Garth Trendall had seen aright. It was indeed a ship that he saw rushing on to inevitable destruction. The meteor which had first

revealed it to the watcher on the Beacon Cliff had also shown to the vessel's captain his imminent danger. As the meteor curved in its descent he saw, to his horror, the dim outline of distant cliffs. He knew what these meant, for it was impossible to materially alter his course. For ten minutes, which seemed to him as ten years, he stood silent at his post, listening intently. Doubtless the thought flashed through his mind that what he had seen to leeward might possibly be the Land's End, and that he was facing right up channel; but if such a thought did cross his mind it was soon dissipated. Despair came into his face as his strained ears caught, above the clamour of the wind shrieking through the cordage and the tumult of the sea around, the deep incessant boom of the ocean as it thundered against the rocky barrier of the Cornish mainland.

Rapidly wheeling about, he descended to the cabin, and found some of the passengers clinging to whatever they could lay their hands on. He besought them to be calm, not because there

was thus much more chance of escape, but because, as men and women, it behoved them to submit to God's will.

'Is there then no hope?' asked one of the passengers.

'None,' was the answer; 'or rather there is none for this ship. In God's mercy, some of us may perchance reach the shore alive. As for myself, I commend myself to His hands.'

There was no panic. Death was too near, too certain, for this. Some prayed, others lay in their berths in a strange stupor; a few spoke in awed whispers, and that saddest of all words, *Farewell!* was breathed on several lips. Once only a man laughed. It sounded like the mockery of hell. Then, with head thrown forward the same man gave forth broken sobs, weeping wildly at he knew not what, for the terror of his fate had upset his reason.

The four men at the helm remained firm at their post, though they knew what was coming. The officers and some of the crew cut loose the lifebuoys and everything that might ultimately

prove of service in the final struggle for life, and on the forecastle the third mate stood ready to send off the rockets. Up at last went the great curves of fire, illuminating the scene round as if an impenetrable curtain had for a moment been drawn aside.

If hope lingered in any man's mind it died out in that moment. In front loomed a sheer wall of cliff, a little to the right of which lay a spit of land covered with huge boulders, in whose midst swung clouds of spray. Between this background and the vessel rose a band of pinnacled reefs, the billows seething round them in masses of churned foam, like froth from the gigantic teeth of some vast saurian. Even while they held their breaths, the ship would be among these ravening fangs!

This was the scene witnessed by the fishermen of Conger Cove. Ere the light of the rocket was expended, they saw the ship give one wild bound, as if she consciously strove to overleap the gaping jaws in front of her, only the next moment to find herself in their midst,

pierced through with a dozen great wounds, and already savagely mutilated and torn. Rocket after rocket sprang up from the shoreward side of the Slice, only serving to illuminate the scene in front with fitful brilliance. The fishermen could do nothing more, for there was now no vessel into which any rope-bearing rocket could be propelled. Alone, on the largest of the Conger Rocks, hung a portion of the ship—so battered, so shapeless a portion that even the experienced eyes of men like Garth Trendall and Ivo Marshall failed to identify what it was. Some thought it was a portion of the poop, others of the fore-deck. Keen-eyed Mat Webb declared it to be the lower part of the mainmast, with a mass of ropes and miscellaneous wood-stuff.

No life could have been saved from such a wreck, for no human being could be swept straight thither from the Conger Rocks and survive. The only chance for any unfortunate lay in the possibility of some great billow carrying the helpless body in the direction of the Slice Point, thereafter sweeping it

across the inlet on to the shoreward slope of sand.

Every man there knew this, and was prepared accordingly. Close upon twenty of them linked themselves with each other by a strong rope passed once round the waist, leaving about a yard between each. The man at the seaward end was more firmly secured, and allowed a greater length of rope. This was the post of greatest danger. The end-man was the grapnel of this human chain—of him was required the greatest strength, the greatest daring, the greatest coolness—and, of course, this man was Garth Trendall.

Ah! A human body hurled into the cove on the breast of a gigantic billow! In with a sudden rush sweeps the human chain, one heroic figure battling strenuously with the fierce rush of water.

But suddenly right over Garth and his nearest comrade impends a vast volume of water. Crash! the enormous billow whirls them from their footing, and, stunned as they are, they would be swept away or drowned where they are did not the men on the shore and

the others close thereto make an immense effort, and rescue their two comrades.

As for the body they had tried to save, it was caught by the furious re-surge, and carried out of the Slice again, never more to be seen of mortal eye.

Another rocket. At the same moment what looked like the keel of a small boat was hurled through the cloud of spray which incessantly hung above the entrance to Conger Cove, and from it something white fell back, with two arms wildly tossed into the air.

With renewed strength Garth and his men dashed into the surging flood. The next great wave came and swept both boat-hulk and body within a few yards of them, but still beyond Trendall's depth. A spring, two or three mighty strokes, and he reached the body. Will he be able to retain it in his grasp—will the rope hold in the fierce re-surge? A little puny human strength against the might of tempestuous ocean—is it not impossible that it can prevail?

Yet a few moments later Garth Trendall lay

insensible on the shore, while clasped in his arms was the almost wholly nude body of a man.

BOOK THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERY.

OF the many fine mansions on the slopes of the Sidlaw Hills, few are more noticeable than Firnie Knowe. Built on the gradual incline of one of the pleasantest spurs of this well-known Forfarshire hill-range, it commands from its windows one of the most extensive, and certainly the loveliest, view obtainable within twenty miles of Dundee. When Firnie Knowe and the small estate attached to it passed away from the family which had long been in possession, it was purchased by a Mr. David Armitage, the head of one of the leading shipping firms in Dundee.

At the time this story opens, Mr. David Armi-

tage had been dead about two years. A widower, he had left only one son, who had for the last ten years been a junior partner with his father and his uncle, and who succeeded to full partnership, as well as to all the private property left by his father. Hew Armitage, though only thirty at the time this event happened, had already made himself a worthy representative of the famous firm of Armitage Brothers, and was as universally trusted and respected in the commercial world of Dundee as he was liked and admired in the social sphere in which he moved. Admirable men as both his father and uncle had been, and as the latter still was, neither had gone through life as smoothly as they might have done, for they had allowed commercial rivalry to break up more than one old family friendship. The case where this was most regretted on both sides was that in which the Camerons of Duiart were concerned.

David Armitage and Archibald Cameron had been school companions, had sailed round the world together, and had been associated in the same firm, that of Cameron & Armitage. The

father of Archibald withdrew from the business owing to a series of continuous misunderstandings on certain technical points, and his son followed suit, the two acting henceforth under the title of Cameron & Son; ultimately the old man retired to his property of Duiart and there died. The rivalry between the two great commercial firms grew keener and keener, till at last nothing but the most formal courtesy passed between their representatives. At last it seemed as if fate had decided against the house of Cameron, for disaster after disaster succeeded with startling rapidity, while a corresponding success characterised the operations of Armitage Brothers.

Mr. Cameron had two children, Charles Edward and Mona, a difference of seven years existing between the brother and sister. When the son was in his twenty-second year he had found himself in pecuniary difficulties, and one day an unpleasant report was prevalent that young Cameron had ruinously disgraced himself, and had left the country precipitately. How the matter was hushed up no outsiders ever knew, but from that

day Charles Edward Cameron was a stranger to Dundee. As he was never by any chance seen at Duiart either, it gradually became understood that the young man had died abroad, a report which seemed corroborated by the fact that Mr. Cameron never voluntarily spoke of him, and which became a settled truth when one day the laird of Duiart said gravely to an old acquaintance, who had asked him about his son, 'I have now no son.' This, succeeding the many commercial disasters which had overtaken him, induced Mr. Cameron to break up his business and retire on such means as he had; and it was among the chief pleasures of his later life that David Armitage had sought his friendship again, though the resumption of the acquaintance was not to last long, owing to the intervention of death.

It was some two or three weeks after his father's death, that Hew Armitage rode over to Duiart, on the western side of the Sidlaws, to return in person his thanks to Mr. Cameron for many recent kind attentions. There, for the first time for a period of five or six years, he saw Miss

Cameron. Instead of a slight and somewhat awkward school-girl whom he remembered, he now saw a tall and handsome woman, who combined all the charm of girlishness with the grace and dignity of womanhood; and it was with a new and strange feeling at his heart that he rode away that day. His visits became frequent, and a strong friendship sprang up between the two men, while it became noticeable to every one, except perhaps to Mr. Cameron, that if the young man had an extreme regard for his daughter, the feeling was reciprocal on the part of the latter. Some months passed, during which Mona's father visibly declined in bodily and mental health; but one day in the early summer Hew met the woman he loved as he rode through Duiart wood, and then and there gained her promise to be his wife. When they reached home they found that Mr. Cameron had had a very severe apoplectic seizure, from which it was almost impossible he could wholly recover. The old man lingered on a few days, however; and before his death had the pleasure of knowing that his daughter's happiness was

assured, so far as it was possible to foresee. Having made her promise that his death was not to interfere with her speedy marriage, he sank back on his pillow with a long sigh of relief, and breathed no more.

Three months later Mona Cameron and Hew Armitage became man and wife, and for a year thereafter realised to the full all the happiness they had hoped for. It is here that we catch up more minutely the threads of their lives. Smoothly the threads of life may lie in parallel directions, but at any moment they may be blown far apart, or become inextricably entangled with others of malign fortune.

A year had passed, and yet they had no child, a matter which would in no way have troubled Mr. Armitage had he not seen that something was fretting his wife, the cause of which he could only attribute to this fact. Yet when a little later it became certain that his wife had assured hope of becoming a mother, he found to his surprise and regret that her depression and nervousness seemed only to intensify. At times

he found her in tears, and once, as he entered her little private room suddenly, he saw her hastily thrust what looked like a letter into her desk, and immediately lock the latter, turning to him with a face which became red and pale by turns. Naturally, he anxiously sought to find out from her what cause she had for these frequent states of dejection, but his wife only laughed at him gently, urging that he did not understand women, and that she had always been subject to attacks of melancholy. He was far from satisfied, but questioned her no further, especially as she seemed to become more like her old self again. He had imagined that the trouble arose from some physical cause, and felt greatly relieved by the decided change for the better.

He had loved his wife while she was Mona Cameron. His love had deepened and strengthened in the past year, till now, though he perhaps did not consciously so formulate it, she was to him everything that the sap is to the tree—energy, life-joy, life itself. But even in his

deep affection he was reticent, and if Mona missed anything in his love, it was something of that happy lightness, that joyous trifling, without which love is sure to suffer, mayhap even perish, through its own intensity.

Returning late one summer afternoon from Dundee, Hew Armitage, as he rode slowly towards Firmie Knowe from the small station at which he had alighted, seemed buried in thought. He had cause for this, for he had recently lost a large sum of money through a mysterious forgery—a forgery so dexterous that not only the cashiers of the bank but his own accountant and chief clerk had been deceived, and he himself had found it impossible to point out any deviation from the formation of the letters in his customary signature. He had not the faintest reason to suspect anyone, and the most rigid inquiry, both by himself and efficient detectives, had failed to elicit anything to clear up the mystery. The teller at the bank who had cashed the cheque had recently been appointed to his post from a small branch-managership, and had as yet but a limited expe-

rience of his new work. His information, so far as it went, only amounted to this—that on such and such a day, about the busiest hour, a gentleman had presented a cheque for two thousand pounds, the cheque bearing the well known signature, in Mr. Hew Armitage's hand, of 'Armitage Brothers;' that he had verified it with the signature-book, and had, in addition, said to a neighbouring teller in passing that he supposed it was all right, though it was a large amount for an 'open' cheque; and that the latter had replied that the firm in question had on several occasions hitherto granted cheques 'to bearer' for considerable sums. So far as he could recollect, he added, the payee was a man of about five feet ten in height, slightly built, and, though darkly and heavily bearded, not giving the impression of more advanced age than thirty-five, or thirty-eight at most. No one else seemed to have noticed the presenter of the cheque, and even Mr. Anderson, the teller, said he could not swear to minute particulars, and that even as to his height he might be mistaken, while he had some doubt as to whether he could

with certainty recognise the man if he met him elsewhere—and this in great part from the fact that during the few hurried moments in which the stranger was at the counter he had leaned well over the blotting-pad beside the paying-desk, apparently immersed in arithmetical calculations.

Two important matters of detail remained to be elucidated. One was the number of the cheque. In the teller's books it was entered as x09,915, and the date of the draft was 10th of June, while the last form drawn from the cheque-book of the firm, dated 12th of June, was numbered x09,912, and it was ascertained that during the checking of the books the clerk had not noticed the discrepancy. On examination, it was found that draft-form No. x09,915 was missing from the cheque-book, and that, in addition, No. x09,933 had been removed, in both instances with the portion used for memoranda of the payee and the amount, but so skilfully that the abstraction could only have been noticed by examination. When, where,

and by whom could this abstraction have taken place?

Up to the day of inquiry, Mr. John Armitage had been absent on a visit to the Baltic ports, and his nephew had had entire control of the financial as well as the other departments of the business; it had so happened that, owing to a slightly-sprained ankle, Hew had been unable to leave Firnie Knowe for some days, and that he had transacted necessary business in the morning-room there, a pleasant room opening by French windows on to a lawn that sloped upwards to the edge of the fir-wood which lay behind the house. In an escritoire there he had kept his cheque-books and many private papers, but had on no occasion noticed anything out of order, though he believed he had once or twice left the key standing in the lock of the folding-up shelf. On being questioned if he had not signed the cheque which had been presented, or left it otherwise unfilled up, and perhaps lying loose in his open escritoire, he replied most decidedly in the negative, adding that he in-

variably filled up the side-slip before writing out any draft; that he never did such a thing as put his signature to any cheque till it had otherwise been definitely filled up; and that, moreover, he had put his name to no business-draft on the 10th, and only to two on his private account, both of which had been duly presented and cancelled. During the few days he had been confined to the house, no one had been within it except the doctor and the confidential clerk, who came out daily for instructions, and neither the one nor the other had ever been in the room in question alone.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Armitage had complete trust in their servants, but, of course, the most thorough and searching inquiry was gone into by the detective employed, yet without discovery of the faintest clue, and without leaving the shadow of suspicion on anyone in Firnie Knowe. The detective even (unknown to Mr. Armitage) gathered everything he could about the lady of the house, but, of course, with no result. He did not even find out that the most ordinary household bills were unpaid. All this

was very perplexing, and the inquiry was still further baffled by the discovery that the notes in which the greater part of the two thousand pounds were paid had been exchanged for gold, partly at another bank in Dundee, but mainly at two of the chief establishments in Edinburgh.

A week passed, and there was as yet no clue to the forgery. Hew Armitage did not know, as he rode homeward this evening, that a few hours previously Mr. Gavin, the detective, had expressed his opinion to the bank-manager that the cheque was not a forgery at all as regards the signature, but that the duly signed open cheque had been torn from the book at some favourable opportunity by some one in the house, and that the writing of the sum and the date and the figures had been filled in by some outside accomplice. Mr. Armitage, they both knew, utterly disbelieved this idea, but at the instance of the manager of the bank Mr. Gavin agreed to concentrate his energies on the task of finding out who in the house was the guilty person, a decision, it was agreed, which was not to be com-

municated to Mr. Armitage. Of course every possible precaution was taken wherewith to checkmate such a contingency as the presentation of cheque No. x09,933.

As Mr. Armitage reached the lodge at the south gate of his property he met an under-groom, and as he felt inclined to take a short stroll he dismounted and gave his horse to the man to take home. A long avenue of beech, ash, and silver birch led towards the house, but within a couple of hundred yards thereof it forked, the left branch being the avenue proper, and the right a path which first skirted the garden and then led up to and through the fir-wood behind. It was along the latter that Mr. Armitage proceeded.

This mysterious forgery troubled him greatly, and he was even beginning to feel that he would willingly pay an additional sum to what he had already lost if only the matter could be satisfactorily elucidated. He felt certain that none of the servants was guilty, judging thus not only from the total absence of circumstantial evidence, but also from his own exceptionally

keen insight into character. Still more assured was he that he had not signed the cheque, so that the question arose, was the draft forged in the house as well as abstracted? Whenever this reflection crossed Armitage's mind, it was accompanied by the vague uneasiness already referred to. Who in his household could have the ability to do such a thing? Certainly no one except his wife, and she, of course, was out of the question.

Loud and clear a thrush sang out. It was answered by another at a distance, and the sweet double tremor quivered through the green leaves, as if two happy sunbeams had taken voice to themselves, and sang as they flickered to and fro through the woodland. The young man stopped and listened. Something in the wild, free song touched him, or perhaps something therein in special sympathy with the peace of the lovely June afternoon. From the firs beyond Firnie Knowe came a soft, sibilant sound, as the ring-doves cooed incessantly to each other; and at intervals the harsh scream of a jay or whistling cry of the sparrow-hawk came as pleasant dis-

cords in the general harmony. He sighed at he knew not what, and a happy thought came into his mind of his fair wife, and of the deep love he bore her and that united them so strongly. His vague, undefined apprehension left him, but once more his thoughts returned to this mysterious forgery.

Again and again returned the same endless conjectures associated with the same personages—Johnson, the butler; Macdermott, the coachman; Maxwell, the under-groom, and so forth through all the servants, from the lodge-keeper and gardeners to the youngest in the house—on no one of them could the faintest suspicion rest with any shadow of reason. If he allowed any doubt to influence his judgment at all, it was in the case of Maxwell, the under-groom, who had been at Firnie Knowe only six months, and of whose antecedents he knew comparatively little; yet the lad had come to him with a thoroughly good character, and had given entire satisfaction throughout his present engagement, and Hew Armitage's strong sense of justice prevented his letting any real suspicion rest on

the young man. Then he recalled all who had been in his house within the last month—Dr. Steele, the Rev. James Gilray, Browne the confidential clerk, and one or two friends who had made a passing call—each and all of them wholly beyond suspicion, even if they had never been in his house during the period in question save in the presence of himself or his wife.

Armitage had in his slow stroll passed the north end angle of the garden, and was about to enter the well-known and very beautiful fir-wood which gave the name to his property. A sudden faint but pitiful squealing attracted his attention. Going to the edge of the meadow, he saw at a glance what had caused the sounds he had heard. An unfortunate rabbit had wandered too far a-field, and while browsing there upon some delicate green food had become aware of the presence of its deadliest enemy. Probably it was as much smell as sight, aided, perhaps, by an exceptionally keen instinct of fear, that had warned it of the stealthy approach of a stoat.

As Armitage watched, he caught occasional glimpses of a small greyish animal, almost serpentine in its stealthy gliding movement. When within about ten yards of the rabbit it stopped, as if it were gathering energy for a long swift leap, or as if calculating whether the right moment had arrived or not—for, curiously enough, if the stoat or weasel should miss at the outset, the spell seems to be broken, and in an agony of desperation the prey occasionally escapes. The rabbit seemed to be panting hard, but uttered no sound; then, suddenly, it sprang to its feet once more and ran a few yards, when its strength apparently collapsed, and it crouched upon a low mound of grass and began that pitiful squealing which is so painful to listen to. In absolute silence, as far as the listener could hear, not even rustling the grass as it glided onward, closer and closer drew the stoat; then, like an arrow, it shot forward, gave one bite with its long narrow teeth just behind the ear, and the rabbit was dead.

Armitage had never witnessed anything of the

kind before, and the incident affected him strangely. He knew that rabbits frequently met with their death in this manner, yet there seemed to him something horrible in what he had just witnessed, as if he had been spectator of a real tragedy that had taken place in the security and beauty of the peaceful midsummer afternoon.

The wish to stroll through the fir-wood now left him, so he branched off from the central path by a smaller and little frequented one that led to a tiny summer-house built, so far as the eye could see, of fir cones; from this again ran a by-path in the direction of a practically disused entrance to the gardens of Firnie Knowe. The fir-needles of past seasons covered the path like a soft and yielding carpet, whereon it was a luxury to tread with noiseless footsteps. Not since the early spring had Hew and his wife been there, though they frequently strolled along some of the numerous other paths that wandered aimlessly hither and thither through the wood; so beautiful did it seem this afternoon, that the

former wondered he did not oftener pursue it, mentally adding that he and Mona must make it their goal when next they should wander through the wood together.

There was no wind, and just enough of sultriness to make the air heavy with fragrance, in which the keenest odour was that of the new-mown hay in some meadows not far distant. How like a nightingale's was that thrush's note, yet how much richer and more passionate, if not so electrically thrilling! As Hew stopped to listen, and then turned to resume his walk, a trailing branch of honeysuckle came in contact with his face; how sweet the scent was, how delicate yet so keen, how suggestive of summer and of deep shady hedges wherein robins, wrens, sedge-warblers, woodlarks, and a host of other birds twittered in the grateful coolness. Only a spray of honeysuckle, which indeed Hew Armitage barely consciously noticed; yet which entered into his mind as absolutely as might any important detail. Years afterwards no sudden odour of the honeysuckle could reach him but he instantly remembered this spray whose fragrance now filled the air round him.

As he stood inhaling its scent, ere he thrust it aside, he heard voices issue from the little summer-house in front of him. He was startled into surprise, for he had never known his wife come to the wood alone; yet who could it be except Mona, and, if so, to whom was she speaking? He smiled as he caught himself mentally asking these questions, thinking that he was indeed becoming morbid and suspicious if he could not hear his wife's voice in her own grounds without being startled.

At that moment two figures issued from the summer-house—Mona, and a gentleman whom Hew had not an opportunity to recognise by features, for the two had not looked backward, but, deep in apparently earnest conversation, had proceeded along the half-effaced, struggling by-path in the direction of the high garden wall. A strange repugance to intrude his presence upon them prevented Armitage from letting them know that he was there, so as soon as they had disappeared behind the first turning he entered the summer-house, and sat down by the little round white-painted table at whose

ugliness he and Mona had laughed when they first saw it, but which had been allowed to remain in its pristine condition.

Why he thus acted Armitage would have found it difficult to tell. All he admitted to himself was that he did not then feel inclined to talk to strangers, and that he did not even care to know ~~whom~~ the visitor was. Confound this forgery business! would he never get it out of his mind? No, he would not let his mind dwell on the subject for the present; he had worried enough about it already. So he sat on the rough, cane-worked seat with his legs stretched out, his eyes fixed on the patch of blue sky that shone amidst the leaves of a giant ash in front of the summer-house, and his ears alert to the hum of the grey gnats and the subdued, monotonous boom of a drowsy honey-bee as it swung heavily inside a tall blue campanula.

Suddenly he determined to conquer this unusual listlessness that had overtaken him, and to join his wife and her friend. He had risen half-way with this intent when his eye caught a curious slur on the white, sloping edge of

the little table. It had been caused by some pencilling having been partially effaced, but not sufficiently so to prevent the letters being readable. It had, moreover, evidently been recently done, for a few dusty particles of lead still lay at the end of the smudge. Scrutinizing the writing, Hew was at once surprised and startled to perceive that the letters were those of his own signature—startled for what reason he did not permit himself to say, and surprised because he knew it was a considerable time since he had been in the summer-house, and because he had no recollection of having scribbled his name on the ledge of the table or anywhere else. For a moment he felt sick with the same vague apprehension that had so often troubled him of late, but the next he was again stooping over the table and examining his signature. Blurred as it was, it was too exactly his to doubt its genuineness, the only point of divergence he noticed being the absence of the dot it was his custom to insert between his baptismal and his surname, thus—Hew . Armitage. But this might, as an occasional instance,

have been omitted, or the dot might have been there, but have been wholly obliterated. He felt strangely interested in this signature. Taking out a letter from his pocket which he had forgotten to post, he opened the envelope and compared his name as written there with that on the table-ledge. They were identical, save for the slight exception referred to. No, it could not have been—? it could not have been any other than himself; yet strange that by no mental effort could he recall the fact.

‘And what on earth has it got to do with that cursed forgery?’ he muttered to himself; and yet he illogically enough felt relieved when he further realised that he inscribed the name of Armitage differently when signing for the firm than when writing for himself. It was hardly possible that anyone he had ever met could successfully forge his signature, both as ‘Hew Armitage’ and as ‘Armitage Brothers.’ But again, if he *had* written his signature here a long time ago, how came it to look so recent? Ah, he must have been mistaken about there having been lead-dust still lying about, as if a

very soft or newly-sharpened pencil had been used. Look, there was not a vestige of it now to be seen! But again, who had endeavoured to rub it out—for such an endeavour was apparently pointed to by the smear showing signs of having been rubbed backward as well as forward. Whoever had meant to rub it out, might have done it thoroughly, thought Armitage—unless, perhaps, the person had been interrupted.

‘Oh, well, let it be,’ he said aloud to himself, ‘there’s enough to worry one without puzzling over useless conundrums.’

Walking quickly along the by-path, he in a few minutes gained a turning whence a glimpse could just be had of the moss-stained door which has already been referred to as a seldom-used entrance to the gardens. Mechanically glancing in its direction he was astonished at what he saw. He was not surprised to perceive that his wife and the visitor had only just then reached that distance, for they had walked away very slowly, and he had not really been more than a few minutes in the summer-house; nor

did it at the time strike him as strange that they should apparently be returning by a practically never used entrance, but he was indeed astonished to see Mona suddenly disappear through the doorway, while her friend turned and retraced his footsteps in the direction of the wood.

Yet the two men did not meet, for the visitor took one of the little paths that here branched off in all directions. At a considerable distance Hew heard the footsteps as they occasionally trampled over small crackling branches. 'I'm tired of puzzling,' he again muttered, and then walked rapidly homeward, intending to reach the house by the same garden entrance through which his wife had passed from his sight. In a few minutes he was alongside of the great brown wall, on the other side of which hung, in the autumn, long narrow jargonelles and golden-toned peaches; but, to his chagrin—he found the door locked.

Turning, he skirted the wall for a distance of about a hundred yards, and then gained entrance by what was known as the under-gardener's

door. When he reached the house, he found his wife in her room. The question as to who had been her visitor was on the tip of his tongue, but something made him refrain and wait till Mona volunteered the information, which, he did not doubt, would be very shortly. About ten minutes passed, and she made no remark bearing on the visit of anyone. The dinner-bell rang, and then through a dull, and on one side at any rate, wearisome repast, not the faintest reference was made to the matter which was so occupying Armitage's mind. He felt strangely constrained, and even cold, to his wife; but, determined not to misjudge her in any way, he afforded her more than one opportunity to state naturally what had occurred. A foolish pride prevented his telling her how he had seen her and her acquaintance in the wood, lest she should think he had been watching her suspiciously. Yes, she had taken a stroll this afternoon; yes, it had been in the wood; no, no visitor 'had called upon *us*.' This was all Hew learned.

Strangely enough, what he lay dreamily

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thinking of on his bed that night was not of the mysterious forgery, nor of the writing in the summer-house, nor of his wife's unaccountable reticence: what kept possession of his mind was the incident of the stoat and the rabbit. When at last he fell asleep, the same scene pursued him in his dreams. And then it came, by some freak of vagrant fancy, that the rabbit seemed to him Mona, and the stoat the person he had seen her with; and when he heard again the pitiful squealing he awoke, and by his side heard his wife crying in her sleep.

CHAPTER II.

A PUZZLING INCIDENT.

NEXT morning Hew told his wife that she must have been dreaming, for he had heard her crying in her sleep. Mona's large dark-blue eyes distended as with sudden fear, and in the expression of her pale face there was the expectancy of one who momentarily awaits news of painful import. But her husband only glanced at her, and said nothing further on the subject. She seemed to endeavour to shake off her apprehension or depression, whichever it might be, and to be even more affectionate than usual to Hew, and he prepared to leave Finnie Knowe for Dundee. Even if he had harboured any misgivings regard-

ing his wife's conduct, it would have been impossible to do so in her presence, for Mona was one of those women in whose eyes seem to dwell the very spirit of truth.

Hew Armitage had passed an almost sleepless night, for after having been awakened by the sound of his wife's subdued weeping he had lain silent but thoughtful till a cold, grey light gradually absorbed the shadows in their bed-room, and he knew that the dawn had come at last.

Rising gently, he had crossed the room, and, having partially raised the blind, discovered that a soft rain was falling, and as he looked he felt, through the partially opened window, a breath of fragrance wafted in from the wet lilac-bushes that grew underneath. Thereafter, from his bed he lay watching the sky losing its pallor and becoming slowly vivified, as it were, though for long no positive hue permeated it from the advent of the sun.

Even the acutest pain becomes subdued at this mystic hour of dawn—mysterious because of its subtle influence—which not only affects

man, but the whole animal and vegetable world. And if the disturbing reflections that chased each other through Hew Armitage's mind did not depart and leave him in peace, they at any rate seemed to become more shadowy, more speculative, more as if they were in connection with some strange event that interested while it did not at all materially affect the thinker. The soft, wavering flush which preludes the dawn of a fine day came and went. The morning-star paled like a lamp whose flame grows attenuated, and high in the steel-blue heaven hung the waning moon in a crescent of the most delicate opal. Then a wave of crimson and wild-rose pink suffused the east, the light of day aroused all the birds, and the first beam of the rising sun stole into the room and lit up the golden-tinted hair of Mona. How beautiful she looked, thought her husband; at this moment she seemed to him like an angel, with her delicate pale face retaining some faint dream-smile, and the sunlit hair forming a halo to the youthful head. Even as he looked she sighed, and put one hand to the white breast over which a few

wavy tresses strayed, as if her heart were troubled by some sad and weary thought. Hew noticed the movement, and sighed also as he turned and watched the advancing sunrise. Not far from the window a girl passed to her dairy-work, singing as she went. A little later he heard the voices of the mowers as they met on the wide-sloping lawn in front; and then came the long swish of the scythes as they swept through the dewy grass, a music monotonous but drowsily pleasant. The sharp, keen cries of the blackbirds as they jerked along the ground, the chattering of the starlings, the twittering of the busy house-sparrows and the swallows under the eaves, the high, clear song of a mavis as he swayed upon a bough of fragrant lilac, and shrilly above them all the rapturous rivalry of two or three larks—of all these, as well as of the poignant pervading sweetness of the new-mown hay, Hew was dreamily cognizant.

At last he determined to rise and enjoy a stroll before breakfast, though he did not permit definite expression of the real intention which

lay deeper in his mind. Mona did not awake with his absence, or at any rate not until after he had left his dressing-room. By the time she did open her eyes, to find the broad daylight in the room, and Hew not by her side, the latter was in Firnie Wood, and on his way to the little summer-house.

When he had left the house he crossed the gardens, walked through the rosery, the fruit gardens, and the apple orchard, and then along some marrow and cucumber beds, and past three or four disused forcing-houses till he reached the door by which Mona had entered the previous day. It was locked, certainly, but the key was on the inside. Heavily rusted over, it evidently was rarely used, and seldom if ever removed from its present position. Turning it, Hew found himself on the little vagrant by-path, now crossed every here and there by the pendulous webs of the garden spider, wherein the dewdrops glistened like diamonds in veils of gossamer; these he noticed, and a small green beetle that kept incessantly alighting and then winging onward before his advancing

steps—but nothing else consciously, for his mind was again occupied with puzzling over the origin of the signature he had so unexpectedly discovered in the summer-house. Arriving at the latter, he at once stooped over the little table, but—there was not a vestige of the signature to be seen!

Armitage now felt thoroughly puzzled. Surely all this about his signature in pencil on the ledge of this table was a dream, he thought; yet no, the incident of the previous day was too memorably real. He could not have merely dreamt about it, yet now there was absolutely no trace of the writing, though from the knowledge of the exact spot where he had seen it he fancied he could perceive a slight darkening, as if the vanished signature had left behind it its almost invisible shadow. What could it mean, and what, also, was the significance of the fact that, while Armitage looked puzzled, his expression had lost its late look of apprehension? What was the shadow of fear that had passed away from his mind? But the only thought he formulated was that

his wife had not been out of his sight since the previous evening, and that therefore she could not have been in the summer-house since he had last visited it; but even the rapid formulation of this thought startled him.

‘Heaven knows what I might have allowed myself to imagine,’ he muttered; but his face cleared as he did so, and he set himself with renewed energy to the consideration of the puzzling matter before him.

After all, he reflected, had the signature necessarily been removed by anyone? Might its absence not be accounted for by the rain which had fallen during the night, whose soft plash-plash amongst the lilacs he had heard that morning before dawn? On the table lay in slight indentations two little pools, and the whole surface was wet and shiny with the drops that had fallen from the badly-constructed roof. True, the ledge, or rather the portion of it in which Armitage was interested, was dry, but it *might* have been quite a channel for an overplus of rain-drops. Yes, it was quite likely, he argued,

that the rain had washed the signature away, though it *was* curious that a slight pencilled twirl of a characterless description, close to where the former had been, remained intact.

He turned to leave the summer-house, self-convinced as regarded the disappearance of the signature, and, if not quite at rest about the genuineness of the original inscription, at least willing to let the matter drop from his consideration for the moment, or until after he had heard something elucidatory from his wife.

As he passed out, something cracked under his feet, and, looking down, he saw an object which he at once picked up. It was a slim and short cedar-wood pencil, such as is frequently partially enclosed in a silver setting or case. It did not belong to him, nor did he recognise it as Mona's, but probably, he thought, it did belong to her.

By the time breakfast was over, Mona had made no remark about her visitor. Hew's horse was brought to the door, for he generally rode over

the three or four miles that intervened between Firmie Knowe and the nearest railway-station; and his wife had just kissed him a brief good-bye, when he turned to her with a question which, with all his effort to speak naturally, fell in a constrained tone upon Mona's sensitive ear.

‘By-the-by, dear, when were you and I last in the little summer-house in the wood—you know the one I mean; that built of fir-cones?’

‘Why, Hew, I—I—really don’t remember. Wait a bit—let me see! Why, yes, I recollect now; it was in February last, a Sunday, for don’t you remember it was the first real day of spring, and we were enticed thither from the wood through hearing a robin singing sweetly?’

Mona spoke with rapid emphasis, as if eager only to recall to his remembrance the day in question, but her husband noticed how pale she had suddenly grown when he asked her the question, and how the swift colour still came and went.

‘You are sure that was the last time, Mona?’

‘Yes, Hew.’

‘It’s very strange,’ muttered the latter below his breath; then, speaking aloud, said that he might be home later than usual, as he had something to attend to that was worrying him greatly just now.

‘What is it, dear, if I may ask? Anything wrong in business, or is it some personal matter that is worrying you?’

‘I will tell you another time, Mona, but now I must be off;’ and with these words Armitage rode away, for the first time since his marriage forgetting to wave his hand to his wife ere he became lost to sight owing to a turning of the long beech-avenue. The latter noticed this omission, and the tears rose to her eyes, only to be checked, however, in a moment, as she called to mind what Hew had just said relative to something that was specially engrossing his attention.

When Armitage reached his office he found Mr. Gavin, the detective, awaiting him. As yet, the latter declared, he had not obtained anything satisfactory as a clue, and, by some remark he

dropped, Hew inferred that the detective considered that *he* would be able to assist him materially.

He had fully intended to tell the officer not only about the matter of the signature on the ledge of the summer-house table, but also about the finding of the pencil. However, he decided not to mention the latter fact just then, at any rate.

Slowly and circumstantially he put the matter before Mr. Gavin, in whose eyes twinkled a momentary gleam of triumph, as if some unexpressed speculation of his was a foregone conclusion.

‘Have you any opinion on what I have just told you, Mr. Gavin?’

‘Well, sir, I never go upon the plan of saying what I think about anything till I feel quite sure my opinion is based on something reliable. But I would like to ask you again if you are quite certain that you never wrote that signature within, say, the last month; also, if you have, within the last few months, written to your wife any note signed with your name in full?’

‘As to your first question, I can answer you most decisively that to my certain knowledge I did not write the signature in question within the last month or two months, whatever I may *possibly* have done earlier. As to your second query, I would like to know why you ask it?’

‘Oh, simply, Mr. Armitage, because if you *had* written such a note, your wife might by chance have left it lying about, or accidentally mislaid it, or perhaps thrown it in the waste-paper basket—and thus, of course, it might have got into hands that had no business with it.’

‘Well, Mr. Gavin, all that I can say is that, while I have undoubtedly written short notes to Mrs. Armitage when I have been from Firnie Knowe for a day or two, I have no recollection of signing any with my name in full.’

After the detective had gone, Hew felt somewhat ashamed that he had not told about the pencil he had found. Why had he not done so? He did not know, nor did he attempt to explain the fact even to himself.

In the meantime it was agreed that the matter of the forgery was to be kept as quiet

as possible—above all, that it should not be allowed to get into the papers. Armitage had just arranged [this with the bank-manager when, as he was leaving, he again encountered Mr. Gavin, who seemed glad to see him accidentally, profiting by the opportunity to ask him if *every* one in Firnie Knowe knew of inquiries having been made about Maxwell, the under-groom, and one or two others.

‘No,’ replied Hew, ‘I do not think anyone in my house has the least suspicion that anything is wrong. Even my wife is quite ignorant of the forgery, though by my inquiries she may have thought I had mislaid a cheque, which she probably soon imagined I had found, as she made no subsequent remark.’

As the speaker went down the bank steps, the detective looked after him, a momentary glance of pity in his shrewd grey eyes, while under his breath he muttered,

‘None so blind as them as won’t see.’

The engrossing matters of detail of an exceptionally busy day kept Armitage from thinking about the forgery, and everything

connected with it; but when he got home that evening he remembered his intention to ask Mona about the pencil. Their physician and friend, Dr. Steele, had dropped in to dinner—a customary thing for him to do, as he lived close at hand. After the two gentlemen had finished their cigars in the smoking-room, they joined Mrs. Armitage on the verandah in order to have their coffee in her company; and while there a letter was brought to Hew, after reading which, he asked his wife in a low tone for her pencil, as if he were desirous of making some memoranda. Mona at once detached a silver pencil-case from her watch-chain and handed it to him.

With a start which he could not quite conceal, Hew discovered that it was devoid of the pencil it was constructed to contain. Hastily making some remark to the effect that he would be back in a minute or two, he went into the dining-room, and taking from his pocket the cedar-wood pencil he had found in the summer-house, he adjusted it to the silver case. It fitted exactly. Looking closer at the pencil, he

noticed a small scratch in the upper part of it—a scratch that had evidently been worn by frequent moving to and fro; and immediately afterwards he perceived in the case itself a tiny jag in the metal, the probable cause of the scratch in question. To make sure (and Armitage now acted in a perfectly calm and deliberate manner, and just as if he were interested in solving some trifling perplexity), he opened his penknife and pared down a pencil of his own till it exactly fitted Mona's case, and then, having rendered its surface quite smooth, he inserted it. When he had satisfied himself that it fitted as if made for the case, he pressed the small knob on the outside, and caused the pencil to project as far as it could, repeating the performance two or three times. On withdrawing the pencil, he found it scratched in a manner slighter, but otherwise identical with the one belonging to his wife.

There is a time in some lives when it seems as if a sudden breath of age had obliterated the bloom of maturity; and there

are also occasions when this strange, anticipatory blight descends for a few terrible moments, only to pass away again, leaving no perceptible shadow. Thus was it with Hew Armitage. For some moments—not fleeting seconds, as measured by the agony of the man's heart—the blight of age seemed to come down upon him. His face, reflected in a mirror, caught his gaze, and he looked at it fixedly, seeing there the face of a man with a haggard aspect, and eyes in which some great grief not so much brooded as lived. But with compressed lips he fought down some agonising doubt, and by sheer vigour of exceptionally robust moral fibre conquered that shadowy surmise which had sprung almost into full and deadly embodiment. With such conquest there must have emanated some invisible spiritual radiance which banished the gloom that had a few moments before darkened and furrowed his face, for, when Hew stepped out on to the verandah again, neither Mona nor Dr. Steele saw reason to take notice of any appearance of weariness or illness, though the former did let her eyes dwell lovingly on her

husband's face, noticing there, with the quick sight of wifely affection, what a beauty occasionally, as at this moment, illuminated Hew's somewhat stern features.

'Mona dear, your pencil was not of much use to me, for it only consisted of the silver case. You must have dropped the pencil itself somewhere.'

'Oh, yes, of course I did. How stupid of me to forget. I think I must have dropped it yesterday when I was out for a stroll, for in the evening I missed it when I wanted to mark a passage in a book I was reading.'

'Perhaps this was it: I found it in my pocket just now, having evidently transferred it from my other waistcoat.'

'Yes, it is; I'm glad you've found it, Hew. It belonged to dear papa, though I doubt if he ever used it. But where did you find it, for I looked for it quite anxiously?'

'I found it in the summer-house yesterday, lying below the little table. I had dismounted at the lodge and strolled up through the wood, and something or other allured me along

the by-path that leads to the summer-house. By-the-by, Steele, did you ever know how poor Bunny meets his death at the hands, or rather at the teeth, of the weasel-kind?' And Armitage went on to narrate the incident of the rabbit and the stoat, which had so much impressed him the previous day.

He did not scrutinise his wife's face as he told her where he had found the pencil, so that his brief glance, ere he had addressed himself to Dr. Steele, did not perceive that the treacherous colour slowly ebbed from Mona's face, and that her eyes were fixed upon him with much the same look of fear as the rabbit had first regarded the approach of its stealthy foe.

But Dr. Steele noticed it, and it seemed to him as if the expression of her face shadowed forth such thoughts as—'What does he mean?' 'What does he know?' Only *seemed* to do so, the doctor meant, for, of course, not the shadow of any suspicion crossed his mind, all the more so from the fact that he knew of no cause for the latter, neither Armitage nor anyone else having

said anything to him about the forgery. But he was professionally very interested in Mrs. Armitage. There was something about her he could not quite fathom, and this by no means signified little, for Dr. Steele had been one of the leading physicians in the kingdom, and people had come to him in Edinburgh as one of the greatest specialists living. For the last twenty years he had confined himself to the study of nervous disorders, and was considered a specialist on all kinds of brain disease; and it was while gradually limiting himself to the treatment of brain cases only that he caught his second attack of rheumatic fever, an attack which so seriously affected the vital organs, and especially the heart, that he was advised—and knew himself how good the advice was—to leave his absorbing practice and live quietly in the country. His son, who was almost as great a physician as the father, took his place, and by no means altogether regretfully the famous specialist left Edinburgh and purchased a small property adjacent to the Sidlaw Hills, and in the immediate neighbourhood of Firnie Knowe. Here he

chiefly employed himself in writing an exhaustive treatise on the various nervous disorders, in visiting his friends, among whom none more frequently saw him than the Armitages, in quiet open-air exercise of different kinds, and in occasional visits to Edinburgh and London, when his services were implored in some exceptionally important and complicated case. A tall, rather gaunt man of about sixty years of age, with sparse grey hair tumbling roughly over his high but somewhat narrow forehead, large and coarse eyebrows bristling over the keen grey eyes, aquiline nose, and broad, straight mouth dominating the whole face—one felt at once that he was not a man to waste time or be trifled with. Despite his aspect, and the wonderfully penetrating glance of his eyes, he had the faculty of taking everything in without staring his patient out of countenance, so that many felt easier with him than they had ever imagined they could have done when they met him for the first time.

Armitage had already spoken to Dr. Steele about his wife's strange fits of depression. At

first the latter had attributed them to natural causes, and reminded Hew of the fact that, as his wife would in due time become a mother, he must not be put about by every trifling indisposition or fit of dejection that Mona experienced; but later on he found little things he could not quite explain. One day he even took the trouble to find out from the late Mr. Cameron's family doctor if he had ever known or heard of anything mentally wrong in any member of the family or its collateral branches, but discovered only the unimportant facts that Mr. Cameron had been a little eccentric and a very passionate man, and that he had had a cousin who had committed suicide, but under what circumstances Dr. Steele's informant could not tell him. Later on he learned from Hew that the cousin had suffered from religious mania, and had put an end to himself during an attack of extreme dejection, and, moreover, that the latter's mother had been subject to months of depression at a time.

A peculiar furtive movement of Mrs. Armitage had drawn his attention to her to-night, even

before he had noticed her sudden paleness at her husband's remark about having been in the summer-house. But when he saw the latter he felt inwardly relieved, for here, he argued to himself, was an indubitable sign that Mrs. Armitage had something tangible on her mind, and no mere vague apprehension of some indefinable trouble. What could it be? he wondered, while apparently listening to what Hew was saying: what could it be? Did he not know Mrs. Armitage intimately, and did not his insight tell him that her nature was a transparent one, and that if she had harboured any guile it would have reflected itself to any interested observer as clearly as a deep pool contains the image of the leafy branches which curve over it from above.

A little later the two gentlemen became absorbed in the discussion of some new political change that was then passing like a storm-cloud over the country, and Mona was left alone to her thoughts.

She lay back in her cushioned wicker-chair and looked dreamily out into the dusky gloom

of the night. The young moon had just risen, and hung like a crescent of pale fire among the black branches of the firs beyond the lawn. Not a breath of wind blew, and there was no sound save the faintest buzz of the grey gnats, as they danced in small, gossamer-like clouds below the swarthy boughs of the copper-beech that rose almost beside the verandah to the left. A trailing jasmine gave out its pungent and exquisite odour. Mona's face grew paler, and her strength seemed to ebb away imperceptibly but rapidly. Right across the lawn swooped a fern-owl, with that peculiar gurgling sound which had given the bird the name it is best known by, the nightjar; and at the same moment Hew looked round to see if his wife had noticed the bird, whose cry she had often heard, but whom he remembered her having said she had never seen. Her face being in a deep shadow he did not perceive how still she was, but, even while his gaze was fixed on her, a large brown moth flew awkwardly across her face and got entangled for a moment amidst her hair. She did not stir, and made not the least semi-conscious movement.

‘Mona,’ cried her husband, sharply, ‘are you not well? Look, Steele, I’m afraid she has fainted.’

Armitage was much alarmed, but was soon reassured by his friend, who declared it was only a swoon, and that Mona would come round very shortly. Her husband took her in his strong arms, and, lifting her into the drawing-room, laid her on a couch. Two, three, five minutes of suspense followed, wherein she made no sign, and an anxious look came into Dr. Steele’s keen grey eyes; but at last she sighed gently, and then her dreamy gaze was intercepted by her husband’s. Closing her eyes again wearily, she murmured something in an appealing tone just below her breath.

‘What did she say, Steele? I could not catch it.’

‘Oh, some incoherent words,’ replied the doctor, hurriedly, who had, however, distinctly heard her words, faintly as they had been pronounced. They were, ‘*Forgive me, Hew.*’

In a short time Mrs. Armitage was sufficiently recovered to be taken upstairs, and, by Dr.

Steele's advice, was left alone in the deep sleep into which she had fallen.

‘She is all right now,’ he said, ‘and had much better be left alone. I should advise you, Armitage, to sleep in the dressing-room to-night, and you could leave the door open, so that if Mrs. Armitage should awake and want anything you would be at hand.’

The two friends had not long been seated again on the verandah before Dr. Steele turned to his companion and said, gravely,

‘Your wife, Armitage, is very far from strong. She has had no serious worry of any kind of late, has she? And, excuse my asking you, my dear friend, but has there been any little misunderstanding between you, for in her present delicate state the least thing would impress her too strongly?’

‘No, I am glad to say we have no misunderstanding of the kind you refer to, nor do I know of anything that could be a source of serious worry to Mona. Indeed, it was because of the state of her health that I refrained from telling her even the bare facts of a matter that

has been causing me the most serious anxiety of late. Although I do not wish it talked about, I will tell you, Steele, all about this most unpleasant affair —if, indeed, you have not heard of it indirectly already?’

On Dr. Steele’s assurance that he had heard no rumour of any kind affecting Armitage, the latter proceeded to give a detailed account of all that had occurred, and of all the puzzling features of the case. Like most great physicians, Dr. Steele had the power of the accomplished lawyer to extract definite and essential information from the person to whom he might be speaking, and, like the master-detective, of getting to the root of the matter in hand with as much thoroughness as possible. Listening with great attention to his friend’s account, he every now and again broke in with some question so much to the point that, by the time Armitage had finished his narration, he was possessed of as full and accurate information as Mr. Gavin himself.

‘What do you think of it, Steele? Or do you find it as impossible to form an opinion as I do?’

After a moment's silence, the doctor replied that he could not form an opinion as to the personality of the forger, but that he could not see any way out of holding the belief that at any rate the abstraction of the cheques was perpetrated by some one in the house.

‘As to the person,’ he added, ‘I can say nothing, of course. You seem to have complete trust in your servants, and are, moreover, certain that you never left your escritoire open save when you were in the room, or were having your morning or post-prandial smoke on the verandah, a time, of course, wherein no one would venture to commit the theft, for the double reason that you see the whole room from where you generally sit here, and that the abstraction would be certain to be immediately noticed. You are again sure that you never left it open during your absence in Dundee? Yes. Well, then, is Mrs. Armitage in the habit of occasionally using the escritoire?’

‘No, Mona’s certainly not in the habit of using it. That she has done so occasionally I know, and I may tell you she generally puts all the

important receipts we get into a drawer therein.'

'Does she do so when you have returned from business, or when?'

'Oh! I don't know, I'm sure; what does it matter whether she puts them in during the forenoon or the afternoon? By-the-by, I never asked her with great particularity as to whether she had used the *escritoire* lately, partly because I knew that she was always careful to close it again, but chiefly from my anxiety not to let her see that I was worrying about anything.'

Neither noticing Armitage's latter remarks nor the tone of irritation in which his words were expressed, Dr. Steele continued the questioning in the sequence of his thoughts.

'But if your wife could put away the receipts at any time, or write a note at your *escritoire* if in a hurry, or to save going upstairs to her own room or elsewhere, she must either have had the key, or you must have left the folding-shelf unlocked.'

'Will you come into the room for a minute,'

said Armitage, and, leading the way to the escritoire, he lit the gas in a bracket beside it, adding, 'You see how securely fastened the escritoire is, yet the key is there if you only knew where to find it.'

The piece of furniture was of oak, and was curiously carved, especially along the upper ledge. Although generally quick to discover the whereabouts of secret drawers and hidden interstices, Dr. Steele found himself quite puzzled, and after the most careful examination, wherein his wandering fingers helped his skilled eyes, he was forced to acknowledge that he could not find out the hiding-place.

Along the upper portion of the escritoire ran a fanciful frieze of small carved leonine heads. Shoving one of these up, Armitage touched what looked like a natural knob of wood, and immediately the third head along the ledge to the right, sprang out an inch or so, but enough to show that a narrow drawer ran straight in behind. In this lay the key.

'Certainly a most ingenious contrivance,

Armitage. Where did you come across this *escritoire* ?

‘Oh, we got it during our marriage trip on our way home from Italy through Germany. Nuremberg was the place. But what I brought you here for was to show you that, although I leave the key behind me, it is as safe, or safer, than if I took it with me; for I can absolutely assure you, my friend, that its hiding-place is as unknown to anyone in this house, except Mona and myself, as it was to you until a minute ago. It was owing to a fancy of hers that I purchased the thing at first, and we smilingly agreed that we would never put the key away in sight of anyone, but keep its hiding-place a profound secret. This we have invariably kept to, and no servant or anyone else has ever, to our knowledge, witnessed either of us replacing the key. You are the only person who knows our small secret, Steele.’

By this time it had become a little chilly, owing to that almost imperceptible dampness which so frequently precedes rain, so the two

gentlemen agreed to adjourn to the billiard-room and have a game ere Dr. Steele's horse was brought round to the door.

Armitage evidently concluded that the discussion about the forgery, or at least the manner of the abstraction of the cheques from the *escritoire*, had come to an end. As a rule he was no match with his guest at billiards, but to-night he found himself rapidly drawing ahead, the latter, evidently preoccupied with his thoughts, contenting himself with very indifferent play indeed.

Hew thought he was deep in some professional problem which he had not had time to work out that day during the few hours of study the doctor allowed himself. As a matter of fact the latter's thoughts, as his next remark showed, were much nearer the subject they had been talking of on the verandah.

‘To revert to the question of the *escritoire*, Armitage. Granting that no one of the household or garden servants ever saw you or Mrs. Armitage putting away the key in its hiding-place, it is possible that some one else

did. You do not see very much company here, I know, until the autumn comes round, but still you have doubtless had several casual as well as customary callers. It's a very unpleasant thing to have to look with questioning eyes upon anyone who has entered one's house as a guest, but in a case like this it is only just to all concerned to turn over every possibility in one's mind.'

Without immediately replying, Hew touched a bell by his side, and, when a servant appeared, requested her to bring the visitors' book. A few moments later this was in his hands, when, handing it to his companion, he remarked that the name of everyone who called was invariably entered under the proper date.

'Look over the list for the last two months,' he added, 'and tell me if there is a single name you do not know, borne by anyone whom you could not trust.'

It did not take Dr. Steele long to glance over the not very long list, the only name unfamiliar to him therein being that of Mr.

Browne, the chief clerk to the firm of Armitage Brothers.

‘You are right. There is no one here whom I could for a moment suspect, and, as for this Mr. Browne, you say he is entirely reliable, and that, moreover, he has never been alone in this room. It’s very strange altogether, Armitage. It would seem as if it *must* have been either you or your wife who took away the cheques—accidentally, of course. Has either of you ever walked in your sleep? No? Well, really, I do not know what to think. What does Mr. Gavin say? Does he hint at anything?’

‘I don’t know what he thinks, but he had once the stupid insolence to vaguely hint that my wife may have been under pressing necessity for money to pay off some private debts. Ass!’

‘Ah, Mr. Gavin thought so too, did he?’ murmured Dr. Steele.

At this moment the latter’s horse was announced to be at the door, and it was added that the rain would soon be on. Hastily bidding

his host good-night, and promising to see Mrs. Armitage the next day, he rode off. Despite the rain, which had now come down heavily, the doctor let his horse go at a walk for a great part of the way. When he reached his house, the groom who led off the horse heard his master exclaim, as if arguing with some one,

‘Yes, but did he not say that Mr. Gavin thought so, too; and what did she mean by that murmured, “*Forgive me, Hew*”?’

CHAPTER III.

MR. CHARLES LEITH.

A WEEK had elapsed since the events detailed in the last chapter, and yet not the slightest clue had been obtained as to the person who had forged, or at any rate abstracted, the two cheques from Hew Armitage's escritoire. Detective Gavin had been unable to discover any debts incurred by Mrs. Armitage outstanding in Dundee, but this was only what he had expected, for he believed that the lady—if she had any debts at all—must have got herself into a mesh at Edinburgh, as in the former city she would be too well known. It had become his firm conviction that Mrs. Armitage was not only

the abstracter, but the forger of the false draft, but he did not think she had herself carried the transaction through, believing that she had an accomplice ; for, unknown to her husband, Mr. Gavin had learned from the under-gardener that once or twice Mrs. Armitage had been seen walking in the wood with a gentleman whose face was unfamiliar to the servant in question. But, though he felt assured that the lady was guilty, he was not at all certain as to the cause of the crime. It might be debt ; it might be half-a-dozen other things ; and the difficulty was to find out what the real cause was.

‘If only Mr. Armitage would give all the assistance in his power,’ thought the officer, ‘I would soon be able to put my hand on the guilty party. I expect he already half fears a scandal, and would prefer to let the matter drop altogether.’

Mr. Gavin was quite mistaken about his employer. Hew Armitage had not the least idea of letting the enquiry fall through, but he relied on some clue being unexpectedly found

ere long, perhaps even—considering how little the matter had been talked of outside the persons concerned—that the cheque No. x09,933 might yet be presented, if not by the forger, at least by some one who might be the means of the discovery of that personage.

As he had promised, Dr. Steele called the following day to see Mona. He found her so much better mentally as well as physically that he was as much puzzled as he had been before her fainting attack on the verandah. Whatever suspicions he had entertained now lay dormant, for they could not be said to have been quite allayed.

‘It is impossible to believe her guilty,’ he said to himself, while with her. ‘If she should prove guilty she must be possessed of a greater power of deception than any person I have ever met, and that is saying a good deal,’ he added, as he rode homeward.

It was one of those important seasons when Armitage was often detained very late in town, and for some three or four days past he had not reached Firnie Knowe until the late evening.

As he had about a week of this close attention to his business to look forward to, he would have arranged to put up for that time at his club in Dundee, had it not been for his renewed anxiety as to Mona's health since her late fainting attack. One afternoon, however, he had a return of a kind of rheumatic headache which had formerly troubled him a good deal, and as the pain steadily increased, he determined to go home some hours earlier than he had been doing for the last few days.

When he reached Firnie Knowe his eye caught the open visitors'-book on the hall table. Glancing at the day's entry-space, he saw only one name inscribed—'Mr. Charles Leith'—a name quite unfamiliar to him, and, he supposed, belonging to some friend introduced by some mutual acquaintance of Mona or himself.

Entering the drawing-room he found no one there, so supposed that the visitor had called earlier in the day, but as he approached the verandah by way of the conservatory, he heard voices at the further end of the latter.

As his footsteps rang along the ironwork of the pavement the voices ceased, but as he turned into the fernery he saw his wife and a gentleman seated on the wicker sofa that stretched between two tall cabbage palms.

Rising hurriedly, Mona seemed for a moment confused, but mainly, as her husband inferred, because of his unexpected appearance at that early hour.

‘You are not looking well, Hew,’ she said. ‘Is anything the matter with you?’

‘Yes, I have one of those troublesome rheumatic headaches; but, Mona, you are forgetting to introduce me to your visitor.’

‘Pardon,’ answered Mona, lightly, but she did not smile as she spoke. ‘Hew, this is my old friend Mr. Charles Leith, who will be glad to make the acquaintance of my husband.’

While the two men shook hands, Armitage realised that the man before him was the same he had seen some time ago with Mona in the fir-wood. With a stiffness he could not quite

subdue he told Mr. Leith that he had fancied he had seen him somewhere lately, and asked him if he were residing in Dundee. As her husband spoke, Mona's face became suffused with a quick but transient flush, and her eyes had a startled look as they fixed themselves on those of Mr. Leith as if dreading what he was about to reply, or perhaps to evade. Evidently to her relief their visitor spoke out frankly.

‘Well, I hardly think you can have seen me before, Mr. Armitage, unless by chance you may have seen me in Dundee, where I have been staying off and on for a short time past, till my visits in the North are all paid. I hoped to see you when I was here last, a week or so ago, but unfortunately missed you. My old friend, Mrs. Armitage, however, kindly showed me over your beautiful grounds, and as it was a lovely day I greatly enjoyed the stroll we had in Firnie Knowe. I might have met you that afternoon but that I took a fancy to return to a friend I had left at Dunmuir by way of Firnie Wood and over the Sidlaws.’

After this statement Hew's manner thawed

considerably. Some doubts he had experienced had evidently been set at rest; and his wife, quick to perceive this, became also less constrained. Mr. Charles Leith, however, was the only one of the party who seemed quite at ease; and, as he spoke fluently on nothing in particular, Armitage had ample occasion in which to scrutinise him. As tall as Armitage himself, but much slimmer in build, with a pale olive complexion, smoothly shaven cheek and chin, lustrous dark-brown eyes, and black hair closely cut, Mr. Leith was undoubtedly a good-looking man, especially when his features were in repose. If he could not be called handsome, it would only be because of his expression when he smiled—a smile that was wont to cause as much facial change as a dark cloud does when, trailing rapidly before the wind, it banishes the sunshine for a few moments, and turns the brilliant glow that had lain upon the landscape into a grey and gloomy monotone. It was the least mirthful smile that could be imagined, and though it was manifestly caused by a malformation of the lips or mouth, not

noticeable in repose, the effect upon strangers was invariably unpleasant. The eyes were of that unfathomable brown which reveals nothing, neither becoming illuminated by pleasure, nor deepened by emotion, and emitting only a dull sparkle in moments of exceptional excitement. That Mr. Leith was aware of the effect his smile was wont to produce was evident to all who knew him, from the fact that he very rarely allowed his lips to uncurl from his teeth. As far as Armitage could judge, he would be about thirty years old, but possibly as much as two or three years younger.

More than once, finding Armitage's eyes curiously fixed upon him, Mr. Leith at last asked his new acquaintance if he thought he had seen him somewhere.

‘No, I cannot say that I think I have met you before; but you put me in mind of some one I have seen, but whom I cannot, by any mental effort, recollect. Probably it may be one of those indefinite resemblances that we all find once in a way in total strangers. But

do not rise to go yet ; our dinner-hour is close at hand, and I am certain that my wife will regret if such an old friend contents himself with a formal call.'

The invitation was courteous and genial, but both his wife and their visitor noticed the unmistakable emphasis on the words 'an old friend,' and the former glanced at the latter appealingly, as if she hoped he would decline.

Possibly Mr. Leith thought the glance betokened that he should stay ; at any rate, he expressed the pleasure he would have in accepting the suggestion, and at once seated himself again. Looking at his watch, Armitage exclaimed that it wanted nearly an hour yet from dinner-time, and proposed a stroll. Mona rose, as if to get her hat or shawl, but her husband interposed with a remark that she was to remember Dr. Steele's advice, and lie down an hour or so before eating.

'But, Hew, I have not been out to-day except

for a short stroll in the garden in the early forenoon, and surely you shouldn't be going out again with one of those dreadful headaches imminent.'

'The warm air will do me more good than harm, Mona, and my head won't get any worse for some hours yet, if it doesn't feel all right again by that time. Go and rest now, dear, or there will be two of us with headaches this evening. Come, Mr. Leith, we will have a stroll before dinner.'

As her husband returned to the hall to get his hat and stick, Mona rose, and, going close to her visitor, said, hurriedly, in a low tone,

'Why did you come here like this, and why do you stay now that you are here? You must be mad.'

'No, *ma chère*, I'm not mad. Very much the reverse, I should say,' and Mr. Charles Leith's unpleasant smile darkened rapidly over his delicate face. 'Ah, here comes Mr. Armitage.'

The latter and his guest strolled through the flower and fruit-gardens, and ere long arrived

at the door by which Armitage had before seen his wife and his present companion take leave of each other. Entering the disused glass-house, he lifted the key from the place he had deposited it, and then, the door having been opened, the two entered the wood by the little by-path. Two or three times Armitage felt Leith's eyes fixed on him suspiciously, but, taking no notice of this, he led the way to the little summer-house. Coming on it abruptly as they did, it was quite natural for Hew to say, in a tone in which one mentions some casual remark,

‘Ah, this little ramshackle erection is a place my wife and I used occasionally to come to. But we have not been here together for a long time past. But perhaps you came this way the time you were here before?’

For a moment Mr. Leith seemed nonplussed, but after a perceptible hesitation he replied that it must have been the same, as he remembered having been in some summer-house somewhere in Firnie Wood.

‘What a strange coincidence,’ Hew went on,

in a coldly balanced tone, 'for it so happened that on the very afternoon in question I left my horse at the lodge and strolled in this direction, for the first time for some months. I must just have missed you by a few moments, I expect.'

Again a swift, sidelong glance betrayed that Mr. Leith was suspicious of something, but he seemed to be master of that invaluable rule—when in doubt say nothing.

For some time past Armitage had debated in his mind as to his right to draw out any information from his guest relative to the acquaintance of the latter with Mona, and had come to the conclusion that he was hardly justified in so doing; but something in his companion's manner, perhaps his frequent and stealthy glances, made him change his intention.

'Did you think my wife looking stronger or not from what you remember her? For I suppose it is a long time since you saw her?'

'No, Mr. Armitage, I cannot say she is looking so well.' Then, seeing a pained look come into his companion's face, Mr. Leith went on, with

what a third person might have seen to be very enjoyable malice, 'And she has lost that bright, happy look she used to have. I used to think I had never met anyone who so much enjoyed the mere act of living.'

Armitage winced, but kept to the point.

'It must have been some years ago that you knew Mrs. Armitage, otherwise I could hardly have failed to have met you, or at least to have heard of you; for, if you will excuse my saying so, I cannot recollect having heard my wife or any of her friends ever mentioning your name. Doubtless you have been abroad?'

'Yes, I've knocked about a good deal. Don't you think continental life unsuits one for the even flow of British respectability? It always strikes me that there is an air of stagnation brooding over everything in this country.'

'I have not noticed it,' responded Armitage, icily, 'though I have been much abroad myself. I am afraid I am one of the respectable Britons who would meet with your denunciation, Mr. Leith. There is no doubt much that we might learn from some other nations, especially, in my

opinion, from those of the south, but there is much that we are decidedly better without. In this country the adulterer meets with no sympathy, and, though the law forbids a wronged husband to himself take revenge, public opinion never severely condemns a man who knows how to repay the seducer.'

There was a moment's silence, and then Armitage resumed, with unexpected and intense emphasis.

'If I were in the place of such a man, I would shoot the traitorous hound as I would a tiger.'

Though Mr. Leith had striven to divert the conversation from the subject of Mrs. Armitage, he did not seem to quite like the turn it had now taken. In a half-laughing tone he said, as he turned away his head,

'Ah, yes, of course, to be sure. But then, you know, we never hear now of anybody shooting anyone else in England.'

'Perhaps because less reason is given for such an act. But, to return to what we were saying, I did not catch what you said about the time

you knew Mrs. Armitage, when she looked so much happier as well as stronger.'

'Oh, well, Mr. Armitage, you must not take my words quite seriously, for you know how apt we all are to confuse things as they were with things as they are. When we return to our native village after years spent in London or Paris, it's sure to seem to us neither so large nor so beautiful as it was in our boyhood's days.'

'Ah, then it is the lapse of time alone that has caused you to find Mrs. Armitage so much fallen off in strength and good looks,' said Hew, drily. 'It must surely have been quite in your boyhood that you knew her, for to my eyes (prejudiced though they doubtless are) she has done the reverse of fall off in one or the other, except within the last month or so, when she has not been so well as usual. I suppose it was about ten years ago that you were acquainted with each other?'

Armitage felt that he was pressing his visitor in a manner which was hardly courteous, yet he was determined to gain some succinct reply,

even if he had to go the length of demanding the information in the most unequivocal way. This, however, he was saved doing.

‘Ah, let me see. Yes, it must be just about ten years since I knew Miss Mona Cameron. Dear me, what a lot of things have happened since I used to see so much of her in Edinburgh. She was only a school-girl then, but how evenly her life has since pursued its course. As for me, I have been quite an exile for many years.’

A great relief seemed lifted from Armitage’s mind, and he became somewhat less reserved in his manner towards his companion.

Hearing the sound of the dressing-bell, they returned by the short cut whence they had come, but Hew found his wife already in the drawing-room, and had not, till after their guest had left, an opportunity to ask Mona one or two questions upon which he was particularly anxious to hear what she would have to say. He found Mona very unresponsive, but she excused herself by saying that she felt fatigued, and that she thought she would retire to her room at once.

‘Is Mr. Leith a very old acquaintance, Mona?’ asked her husband, taking no notice of her last words.

‘Yes, Hew; I told you we were old friends.’

‘It must have been a considerable length of time before our marriage that you were intimate.’

‘Oh, we knew each other as children, for that matter. But you know how apt we are to become indifferent to our childhood friends, and this is perhaps the reason why I have never mentioned his name to you.’

Mrs. Armitage did not say this naturally; on the contrary, she spoke with such manifest restraint that her husband noticed it at once.

‘And how long is it since you have seen him, Mona?’

‘I saw Mr. Leith last close upon three years ago. That is, preceding the first time he called here, for I have always omitted to tell you, Hew, that he was here once before when you were away.’

‘I am quite aware of that fact, though his name was *not* on the visitors’-book.’

The strange, startled look came into Mrs. Armitage's eyes again, but passed away as her husband went on to say that Leith had himself informed him of the fact. Looking up after a moment's absolute silence, she found Hew's gaze fixed upon her intently.

'You are certain, Mona,' he said, coldly and slowly, 'that you had last met Mr. Charles Leith about three years ago?'

'Yes, I happened to meet him three or four times about that period.'

'By-the-by, dear, were you at school in Edinburgh?'

'No, Hew; but why do you ask?'

'Simply because of a curious inconsistency between what you have just said and what your friend Mr. Leith told me. He informed me that it was ten years ago since he last saw you, and that when he met you it was when you were a school-girl at Edinburgh.'

'Then he stated what was not true, and I cannot conceive why he should have done so, except out of pure inadvertence. Are you sure he did not speak absently, or as if in answer to some

question the import of which he did not fully gather?’

His wife’s answer and the tone seemed to reassure Armitage, and it was with a sigh of relief that Mona saw him thaw from his perhaps unconscious iciness.

‘One word more, dear, and then we can leave the subject alone. Do you value his friendship—I mean, do you look upon him as a friend whom you would regret not to see again?’

‘I do not say that I would never care to see him again, Hew, but at the same time I should not only not object, but would prefer that he did not come here any more. There are old associations which make it difficult to actually break with him. For one thing, I knew his—his—sister intimately.’

‘Indeed, how strange that I have never heard you speak of Miss Leith as well as of her brother?’

‘No, because she married some time ago, and I have never corresponded with her since. But I do not think Mr. Leith will come here again,

for he told us himself at dinner that he was going abroad again immediately.'

'Well, I shall not conceal the fact from you that I am very glad to hear it. I have not taken a fancy to Mr. Charles Leith, and have no desire to make his further acquaintance; of course I should not have said this had I thought you really valued his friendship.'

And so the discussion as to their late visitor dropped between them, and the subject was not again referred to till a week or two later. One day, towards the end of this period, Armitage had occasion to be in Edinburgh. He had transacted his business, and had entered the Clarendon Café in Princes Street to get some lunch. He found himself almost alone, and after a little became absorbed in his newspaper, and was only vaguely conscious of the fact when two gentlemen came to a small table near him. The two new-comers began to speak earnestly in low tones, and paid no attention to the cognac and seltzer which the waiter had brought them, but they might have risen again and departed without Armitage's taking any notice

of the fact had his ear not suddenly caught the name of his firm mentioned. Looking up quickly, he could only see the face of one of the two men, a face which he did not recognise ; so he fancied he was probably mistaken. As the two rose to leave, he heard the one whose face he had not seen say to his companion,

‘ You clear out, and it will be all right. It’s the devil’s own risk your staying here, Murdoch : and, if you weren’t such a fool, you would know it. I don’t pretend to be anxious on your account, but I am on my own.’

Armitage did not hear the reply, but he recognised the voice of the man who had just spoken, and in a narrow mirror opposite, at the moment the two passed it, he saw the delicate features and hateful smile of Mr. Charles Leith. His first thought was to follow them, but, muttering to himself that he did not wish to have anything more to do with Leith, he re-seated himself. Surely the words he had just heard would admit of no other than an unpleasant interpretation ? What did they refer to ? Was it possible that they had some connection with

the mysterious forgery?—and Armitage started as he recollected having heard, or fancied he had heard, the mention of his firm. No, surely this could hardly be. Mr. Leith had never been in his house alone; but wait, was he quite sure of this? Supposing for an instant this man was the person who had stolen the bank cheques, was it not possible that he had been announced at Firnie Knowe at a moment when Mona was writing at the *escritoire*, and that the latter had, perhaps unwittingly, closed it and replaced the key in the secret drawer within his view? He might have realised the importance of this fact, and also noticed how easy of access the room was from the gardens, and therefore from Firnie Wood behind. And yet what nonsense to speculate thus—for, supposing that he had abstracted the blank drafts from the cheque-book, how was he, a perfect stranger, to forge the signature with such practised exactitude as almost to deceive the chief person concerned himself? These thoughts succeeded each other in Armitage's mind, and, though he became satisfied that his surmise was so improbable as

not to be tenable, he yet felt uneasy at what he had overheard, and wished Mr. Leith and his affairs had never come under his cognisance at all.

‘I thought he was going abroad at once, too,’ he muttered. ‘I wish I was not going on to London this evening, for though I shall be at Firnie Knowe in a day or two again I feel quite put out at the idea that that man may turn up there during my absence. After what I have overheard, I would not have the least hesitation in letting him see that we could dispense in future with the honour of his visitations. I think I had better drop a line to Mona and warn her. And yet no! It’s perhaps better to say nothing about it at all at present.’

Armitage a few hours later was in the mail train for the south. As it rushed through the darkness, he leaned his face against one of the windows as if he could see something through the night. A growing uneasiness had come upon him, and he wished he were home again. This forgery and all that had taken place since its discovery had seriously affected him. Ex-

ceptionally self-reliant and accustomed to decide everything by the exercise of his unaided judgment, he now felt all the more the irritation and perplexity of the mental maze into which he had involuntarily been led. At last, tired out with his thoughts as much as by physical fatigue, he fell into an uneasy doze. Naturally he dreamed, and naturally his vagrant fancies hovered like moths round the central flame of his present trouble. After a time it seemed to him that he saw his wife lying on the sofa in the morning-room at Firnie Knowe; she was very pale, but seemed restfully asleep. Gradually her face took on a troubled look, and she shivered as if a draught of air had reached her; and here Armitage in his dream thought he saw the French window blow open with the light wind, and wriggling in at its base and over the rug and in the direction of Mona a treacherous-looking snake. He could not cry out, though it glided closer and closer to her, and was now almost upon her. At last she gave a wild cry, and even at the moment that Hew sprang forward to rescue her he awoke with

the prolonged scream of the engine as the train neared a station, and found that he had been dreaming.

Children are told that when their ears burn they may be sure some one is speaking of them at that moment. No doubt ears burn from much more immediately physical causes, but there is none the less an element of truth in the popular saying. It is certain that two minds in sympathy can at certain moments and under special circumstances directly influence each other, though a great distance may intervene. When this faculty becomes a voluntary and really potent factor, it is known as the mesmeric influence. When it is vague and unconsciously exemplified, it is not called anything at all, but is none the less a fact of life.

Whether her husband's dream, or rather the actively memorious state of his mind during the dream, affected Mona or not it would be rash to assert, but quite possibly it did so.

She had been sitting in the drawing-room

with a lady, who had come as a guest the same morning; but the latter, who was somewhat of an invalid, had retired early. Remembering that a letter had come for her husband which he had expected, and asked to be sent to him, she went into the adjoining morning-room and readdressed the envelope of the letter that was lying on the table.

Having had several household accounts sent in, she thought she would take this opportunity of checking them with those which had last been settled, and, opening Hew's escritoire, she took the package from its place and began her comparison. She had not been at all well, for some days, and her husband's departure for London, though only for two or three days, had not tended to make her more cheerful. She felt strangely depressed, and though—unknown to Armitage—she had had cause for this hitherto, there was now no reason therefor. Her head, also, which had been troubling her for some time past, soon caused her to grow weary of the account-checking; so, thrusting the papers aside and locking

up the *escritoire*, she went over to the couch-sofa whereon she spent much of each forenoon, and, lying down, closed her eyes.

The evening was sultry and unpleasantly still. The sheet lightning quivered in sudden, tremulous flashes, turning the black branches of the firs into momentary ashen grey, and disturbing the thrushes and other birds, as they huddled close under the leaves, with fitful gleams of an unreal dawn. Though the room in which Mona lay was filled with the lamp-light, the occasional flashing of the lightning could be seen through the uncurtained windows. She noticed this vaguely when now and again she opened her eyes for a brief space, but was glad when she heard the patter of a few drops of rain, always the most welcome sign on such a night. Softly the rain continued to fall, and she could just hear the soft plash it made as it dripped from the over-heavy blossoms of the lilac on to the mass of green leaves beneath. Everything was so still and quiet, and the rain had to some

extent so modified the oppressiveness of the atmosphere, that Mona gradually became drowsy, and would soon have been asleep, but that a sensation of being looked at suddenly caused her to feel wide-awake. She saw nothing, however, though the blindless windows had an eerie look to her perturbed nerves. What was Hew doing, she wondered. Was he asleep, or reading, or thinking of her? Was he—and with a sudden, unaccountable chill she slightly opened her eyes, but without moving. Her glance was fascinated in a moment by what she saw at one of the long windows. Pressed close to the glass was a white face, with vivid eyes fixed steadfastly on herself. The rain that had fallen against the pane seemed to blur the face to her vision, but made it more horrible to look upon owing to an appearance of something unnatural which it gave to it. The eyes seemed to burn out of an ashen countenance, and the latter had the look as if it were passing away in drops of rain.

Mona's face was as pale as that of the

vision she looked on, but she made neither sound nor motion, being as spell-bound as the bower-bird when the carpet-snake fixes its eyes upon her as she sits in her nest. Slowly a white hand came out of the darkness, close to the face, and seemed to beckon to the person within, or perhaps to feel if the window would open with pressure. The very act of motion broke the spell over Mona, for with a loud cry she fell back fainting. Almost instantaneously one of the men-servants, who had been fastening the front-door, entered the room in evident alarm, but, before he had quite crossed the threshold, the face at the window had vanished.

When Mrs. Armitage came to her senses again, she could not be absolutely certain whether she had not been only dreaming; but in any case she felt that she had received a severe shock, as was indeed evident to those around her. When she had been put in her bed, the footman and the butler took a lantern and together examined the ground outside the windows of the morning-room. They hardly

expected to discover anything, because the turf came close up to the house, and there had not been enough rain to render it sufficiently damp to long retain the impression of any foot-marks, unless left by hob-nailed, heavy boots. Nor did they in the uncertain light discover anything until one of the men perceived the impression of a boot-sole on the stone ledge of the window, and almost hidden from sight by a broken lilac-branch. Beyond ascertaining that their mistress's fancy had some other basis than imagination, they learned nothing else, except, indeed, the fact that the intruder could not have been a country bumpkin, for the impression was that of a foot almost small enough to belong to a woman.

It was also afterwards ascertained that Mr. Carston, a neighbouring small farmer, had been returning to his house late the same evening, that he had taken a short cut through Firnie Wood, and that he had been startled to see a man leap over the garden wall of Firnie Knowe and disappear through the wood in an opposite direction to that in which he was going.

Dr. Steele was very much surprised when, the following morning, he was awakened an hour or two before the time when he was usually summoned; but when he heard that it was on account of the sudden illness of Mrs. Armitage he lost no time in getting ready, and ere long rode up to the door of Firnie Knowe.

He found his patient in a brain-fever.

Armitage was of course telegraphed for, and he arrived on the morning instead of the evening of the day on which he had arranged to return. He was terribly anxious about his wife; anxious not only because of the danger in which she lay, but also on account of what could have caused Mona to succumb to such a complaint as brain-fever. Dr. Steele explained it by stating that he had noticed her as being nervously unstrung for some time past, and that the fright she had received two evenings ago had brought things to a sudden and severe climax. While considering the case a grave one, he gave Armitage the small consolation that the attack, while violent, would be

short, and that, having the inestimable advantages of youth and a good constitution on her side, there was every reason to hope that she would get over it all right. At the same time Hew perceived that Dr. Steele was himself very anxious. Before he left, to return in a few hours, he addressed himself again to his friend, but spoke hurriedly and under some restraint, as if he had wished there had been no reason for such a remark as he had to make.

‘You will understand, of course, Armitage, that your wife’s mind is at present a perfect jumble of odds and ends of realities and wild imaginings, and that absolutely no attention need be given to what she says.’

‘I understand,’ replied Hew, gravely.

There was no need, as it turned out, of Dr. Steele’s precautionary words, for throughout the brief but violent course of the fever Mona’s exclamations were so incoherent and so inconsequent that nothing could have been gained from them. Once or twice, however, her lips murmured of her husband, and the intense

ardour of her tone filled Hew's heart with an exquisite gladness, so that, in the midst of his sorrow and anxiety, he felt the blessed assurance that not even the faintest shadow had come between the sunlight of their mutual trust and love.

While everyone else was anxious, Mr. Gavin was puzzled. He had obtained a new clue, which promised not to be without result, and he felt peculiarly desirous of learning something of the present whereabouts of a certain Mr. James Murdoch.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ACCIDENT.

A MONTH had passed since Mrs. Armitage had been stricken down by her attack of brain-fever. Her illness had proved dangerously severe, but had lasted little over a week ; nevertheless the succeeding weeks of prostration proved even more difficult to rally from than the insidious disease itself. Far from satisfactory as her present state was, it was aggravated by the condition in which she was otherwise, for she expected to become a mother in about three months' time.

Nothing had yet been found to prove who the person was who had abstracted and forged the cheques. As Mr. Gavin said to Armitage—

‘It’s a puzzling case, sir, but I’ve struck a little zig-zag path, which, so to speak, may yet lead to the robber’s cave in the centre of the wood. No, sir, I can’t tell you anything yet, and you must take my word for it that you wouldn’t be a bit the wiser if I did conduct you to my zig-zag path.’

Mr. Gavin made a great mistake here, for if he had taken Armitage into his confidence about ‘the party of the name of Murdoch,’ as he phrased it at the head-office, he would have learned an additional fact to what he already knew, which would have almost certainly led to the detection of a person who might at any rate have been able to throw a flood of light on the mysterious incident. A few words more and the whole tenor of Armitage’s life would have been different from what it proved ; but, as these few words were never spoken, he turned away from the officer, unknowing that at that moment another link had been added to the chain which was about to wind itself around his life.

It was a happy day for both Armitage and his wife when the latter was strong enough to

be taken out for a drive. Both felt as if recovery were now a settled thing, and Hew realised how great had been his anxiety and his dread. They had never spoken about the subject of the person whom Mona had seen at the window on the night she was taken ill, Dr. Steele having told Armitage that, as likely as not, it would unduly excite her, but now he felt that they could safely talk it over. While she told him all that had occurred, his dream in the train came back vividly to him, and he was much struck by the coincidence—a matter, however, to which he did not draw Mona's attention at the time.

‘I asked Dr. Steele about it afterwards, Hew, but he said that in all probability I had imagined it; but we afterwards ascertained, or rather he did, at the time, and I on my recovery, that some one really had been there.’

‘You didn't recognise the face, I suppose?’

‘No—oh, no; I am sure I did not recognise it.’

‘You speak hesitatingly. Did recognition of it come later on?’

Mona hesitated a little before replying, and then said—

‘Well, I have fancied two or three times it was like the face of Mr. Leith, but, as we had been talking about him just before I was ill, it is quite likely that my half-remembrance is purely imaginary. How stupid I am!—of course it could not have been he under any circumstances, for you know he was going abroad immediately.’

Armitage was just about to tell her of his glimpse of Mr. Leith in Edinburgh, but refrained. Without consciously doing so, he acted upon the proverb, ‘Let sleeping dogs lie.’

September arrived, and with it Mona gained greatly in strength. As it was a slack time with his business, Armitage was able to indulge in his favourite partridge-shooting, and spent the afternoon of at least every second day in tramping over the fields with or without his friend, Dr. Steele. One day early in the month he joined his near neighbour, Lord Ratho, and set forth to get some grouse-shooting on

the purple slopes of the Sidlaws where they rise beyond the highest reach of Firnie Wood. After some very fair sport, Armitage noticed that his friend seemed very fatigued, and accordingly suggested a rest, to which Lord Ratho assented with every sign of exhaustion.

The latter was so far refreshed by luncheon that he insisted on resuming his gun, much against the wish of Armitage, who saw that his host was far from well, and who had noticed how wildly he had been shooting. The second covey had just been started, when Lord Ratho fired into the air, and fell forward in an apoplectic seizure. Mr. Armitage was much distressed, and, having directed the keepers to carry their master to the nearest farm-house till he was sufficiently recovered to be taken home, he took a short cut over the Sidlaws and by way of Firnie Wood to obtain Dr. Steele's valuable assistance.

By the time he was half-way through Firnie he recollected that it was just about the hour the doctor generally called to see Mona, and

that he had accordingly better turn his steps in the direction of his own house than of the Cedars. The nearest way now was to go by the orchard entrance where he had many weeks ago seen Mona take leave of Mr. Leith.

He did not reach it by the high winding path that led from the summer-house, but by another that suddenly branched to it from the thickest part of the wood.

As he had directed this door to be always kept locked, save when any of the gardeners expected to be continuously passing out and in, which ~~only~~ happened very rarely, he was surprised to find that it gave way with a slight pressure, and he was still more surprised when he saw the key in the outside lock—that is, facing the wood.

‘What stupid carelessness,’ he muttered, as, removing the key, he locked the door from the inside, and proceeded to the disused glass-house to hang it up on the nail inside, where it was supposed to be usually kept.

He started as he entered the old glass-house, and stared before him as if he had seen a ghost.

There, in its usual place, hung the key of the door by which he had just entered, and with the worn-out label attached to it. Looking at the one in his hand, he saw that it had no rust on it, and that it had all the appearance of having been little used.

‘I must find out what this means,’ he said to himself, as a frown darkened over his face. ‘It may mean something serious, but in any case my men know I allow no duplicate keys. As soon as I’ve sent Steele to Lord Ratho, I’ll find out to whom this key belongs, how long he or she has had it, and for what purpose it is used.’

Instead of going across the open fruit-gardens, he took a by-path that led through a thick screen of laurel and box, and as he arrived within a few yards of the spot where the left fork of it curved round to issue upon the lawn in front of the drawing-room, he caught the sound of music coming from within the room, and so guessed that Dr. Steele must either have gone or had not yet paid his visit. The next moment, through a gap in a sweeping spurge-

laurel, he saw a gentleman standing on the lawn outside with his eyes fixed on the open window of the room, as if uncertain whether to advance closer or not. The music ceased, and Mona crossed the room and pulled down the blind of one of the side windows, through which too strong a flood of sunshine was streaming, and, having done so, returned to the piano again, evidently without having caught sight of the figure to her right standing on the lawn. The latter raised his arm in a beckoning attitude, but seeing that Mona had not seen him, advanced a few steps, still hesitatingly. As he did so, Armitage issued quietly from the narrow laurel avenue, and advanced towards the stranger from behind, his footsteps making no sound on the soft, yielding turf.

He had recognised Mr. Charles Leith.

So intent was the latter in his scrutiny of the drawing-room windows, that he heard nothing till he felt a touch on his shoulder.

Swinging hastily round, his pale face grew a shade paler as he noticed who it was, and the expression that lay on Hew's face.

‘Good afternoon, Mr. Charles Leith,’ said the latter, with extreme deliberation, and in a tone of the most icy politeness.

‘Ah, ‘Mr. Armitage, how do you do? Delighted to see you,’ stammered Leith. ‘I thought I heard voices in the garden, so came hither, thinking to find you and your wife strolling about.’

If Mona had not been playing she would, of course, have heard their voices on the lawn, but, as it was, she heard nothing.

‘Will you step this way, if you please,’ continued Armitage, ‘I have a few words I wish to speak to you;’ and, so saying, he led the way to that portion of the garden which was invisible from the drawing-room or morning-room.

An evil look crossed Leith’s face as he followed, but when the two men faced each other again he was calmly polite and indifferent in his manner.

‘In the first place, sir, I may inform you that Mrs. Armitage has been very unwell indeed, partially owing to a fright she received from some intruder who, with some

evil intent, I am convinced, had been lurking about outside the house. I may have my suspicions as to who this personage was, but I need not dwell upon the subject at present. Sufficient that Mrs. Armitage is not yet strong enough to receive visitors.'

'Certainly not, Mr. Armitage. You are quite right. But of course an old friend like myself is different, and I am sure that, if you tell her I am here, she will express a wish to see me.'

'I have no intention of telling Mrs. Armitage that you are here. In a word, sir, I may tell you that she, as well as myself, feel ourselves under the unpleasant necessity of letting you know that we consider a further acquaintanceship undesirable.'

A dull flash gleamed in Leith's unfathomable brown eyes, and a red spot burned for a moment on either cheek.

'I do not believe that Mrs. Armitage has ever expressed herself. And I am sure that for her sake I regret your having such a jealous temperament.'

‘Your sneer has no effect upon me, sir. There are some men from whom I would resent such an insult as you have just given expression to. Coming from you, I confess, it bears no weight.’

Leith’s glance shifted uneasily from side to side in exactly the way as do those of a beast of prey when confronted by some obstacle of fear or suspicion. He seemed hesitating as to what to say next, perhaps what to do next, and at least a minute’s silence intervened before he spoke again.

‘I consider your words and implications intolerable, Mr. Armitage. At the same time, I am ready to believe that you must have some other reason than personal feeling. I am sure that Mona——’

‘I will trouble you, Mr. Leith, to call my wife Mrs. Armitage.’

‘Mrs. Armitage, then,’ resumed the latter, with a polite bow and sneering face; ‘I am sure that Mrs. Armitage——’

‘Excuse me again interrupting you, but I can assure you that Mrs. Armitage is no more

desirous than I am of retaining the honour of your acquaintance.'

'Damn you, you will answer for this. And if you refuse to give me satisfaction I will proclaim you everywhere as a coward, and, moreover, as a jealous coward.'

'No,' responded Armitage, calmly and sternly, 'I will not give you the satisfaction you refer to—in the first place, because I think duelling barbarous and unmanly; and in the second place, because, if I did so far forget myself as to engage in a duel, it would only be if my opponent were a gentleman. No, Mr. Leith, you need not raise your arm threateningly. You might get the worst of it, you know, and then my gardeners or grooms might take a fancy to duck you in the horse-pond. Ah, I see you think discretion the better part of valour. Then as to your proclaiming me a coward or anything else, I think it would be as well if you were to keep yourself as quiet as possible. Supposing I were to repeat my suspicion of a certain transaction between you and your friend Mr. Murdoch?'

This chance remark of Armitage's hit the mark in a way that nothing else he could have said would have done. Leith grew deadly pale and seemed literally to shrink, and it was only when, with quick natural insight, he inferred that his companion had only a glimmering of something wrong, that he was able by a great effort to compose his features again.

‘I cannot conceive what you refer to. Your sudden, vague accusation, coupled with the name of a person I do not know, has quite taken me aback. Who is Mr. Murdoch, pray?’

‘Mr. Murdoch was the person to whom you confided the generous remark that his presence in the country was the devil's own risk, and that you were, while not the least anxious on his account, very much so on your own.’

In a moment Leith recollected where he had said this, and also realised that these were the only words he had been incautious enough to speak above a whisper. There also flashed across his mind a memory of a person having

been at a table close to himself and Murdoch, but whose face he had not seen owing to a newspaper in which the person in question was immersed.

‘Ah, I remember now. You must have been in the Clarendon Café, in Edinburgh, on the day I was there last. I met there, by appointment, my cousin, Murdoch Harrison. He went to the dogs a year or two ago, and lately joined the army as a recruit. He had not been there long before he had a row of some kind, bolted from York (where his regiment was stationed), and turned up at my rooms in Edinburgh, where he had traced me from having seen me in Princes Street. He told me some cock-and-bull story, which I was foolish enough to believe; at any rate I rashly helped him to evade capture. But when I found he had no intention of leaving Edinburgh I determined to let him see that he could expect nothing more from me, and thus it was I came to speak to Murdoch Harrison as I did at the Clarendon Café.’

The absolute assurance with which Leith

spoke, and the swift self-control which had enabled him to change his air of dismay into one of matter-of-fact, staggered Armitage, even while he instinctively disbelieved every word that his companion had just spoken. Knowing nothing material he determined to have a parting shot with the same kind of dart that had wounded before.

‘Ah, the person to whom I referred was not your cousin, Mr. Murdoch Harrison,’ he said, drily, ‘but plain Mr. Murdoch. I did not say that the occasion referred to constituted my only acquaintance with your friend and yourself. But now, sir, I must wish you good-day, and I trust that for your sake, as much as my own, we will not meet again.’

Something in the manner in which Leith shot a swift glance behind him ere he turned haughtily away caused Hew to start with a sudden surmise.

‘May I return you your key of my garden-door, Mr. Leith? I am afraid you inadvertently left it in the outside; perhaps you were in a hurry, or thought it safer there?’

For a moment Leith's unpleasant smile gave that cynical, evil look to his face which it customarily did. Then, saying simply, 'Your last insult is rather far-fetched, I think,' he turned to go.

'Mr. Leith!'

'Well?'

'Did you or did you not use this key to gain access to my grounds?'

'I really cannot say whether that is the key or not, though I presume it is if you say so. I certainly reached Firnie Knowe by the wood, it being at once my pleasantest and shortest way. I thought I would take the chance of the door being open, and, though I did not find it so, I noticed the key in the lock, and so let myself in. Naturally I left it where it was, as I fancied one of the gardeners or some one must have left it there on purpose against his or her return from the wood.'

Had this man the gift of perfect lying, thought Armitage, or was he really unjustly suspected? No, he was an accomplished liar, he thought.

‘I do not believe you. But in any case I may tell you that the door will in future be barred up.’

‘What a pity for Mona! She will miss her short cut to the wood.’ With a wicked smile, Leith turned away, and walked down the broad avenue to the main road.

Armitage’s first impulse was to spring after him, and give him the lesson he needed, but, checking himself, he stood still and watched the retreating figure of his late companion. Just as the latter was about to disappear round the bend in the avenue, after which the house was lost to view, he turned round, and, looking not at Hew but at one of the windows, waved his hand with a gesture of familiar farewell. The blood rushed to Armitage’s face, as he recognised the implied insult, but, as at the very moment he heard Mona still playing, he contented himself by smiling bitterly at Leith’s empty malice.

The most searching inquiry about the duplicate key only served to convince him that his suspicions as to its ownership were correct. What

could Leith have wanted with it, and how did he get it made? He must have abstracted the usual key at one time, and got another made identically the same. Yet to have done this he must have had some definite object in view. What could this object have been? That Leith had had anything to do with the matter of the forgery Armitage could not bring himself to believe, the number of improbabilities far exceeding the single vague possibility. But was there anything else in or about the house which he was anxious to find out or obtain? If not, then it must have been his desire to see Mona privately; and for what reason? Had he some secret to confide to her and to talk over—had there been something between them at one time—had he a belief that he could alienate her love from her husband, either by the force of old associations, or by the charm of his present self?

He was getting wearied of this air of mystery, he said to himself; and he mentally determined that when once their child was born, and Mona had gained strength again, he would take her abroad for a time, and see if change of air

would shake all these mental vapours away.

After the events just narrated, the days went smoothly on, and nothing was seen or heard of Charles Leith. Dr. Steele was no longer anxious about Mrs. Armitage's physical health, but he was urgent that she should have absolutely nothing to mentally distress her, as there was great fear that her brain, being still her weakest part, would be the first thing that would be seriously affected. He did not tell Armitage, but he felt very doubtful as to what would happen after the child was born. Hew was happier and more hopeful, and the forgery matter troubled him less—still as aggravating a mystery as ever, it had become less dominant in his daily thoughts.

As for Mr. Gavin, his clue had not yet led him to the heart of the mystery, but his suspicions were greatly strengthened by an anonymous letter he received, which ran thus:

‘If Detective Gavin is anxious to solve the mystery of the forged cheque signed “Armitage Brothers.” he will save time and trouble if he will concentrate his faculties of observation a

good deal nearer Firnie Knowe than Edinburgh. This hint is given him by one who knows the truth, and is anxious to see it come to light, but who is so placed as to be absolutely unable to afford any further or more definite information. Detective Gavin can do as he likes with this hint, or he may treat it in the manner with which anonymous communications in general should be dealt, but the writer can again warn him that if he neglects it he will simply be wasting his time.'

The post-mark of this communication was Dundee, and for reasons best known to himself Mr. Gavin came to the conclusion that it was a piece of genuine information. At the same time he determined to pursue his inquiries in Edinburgh a little further before returning.

Mona had again become restless and depressed, but, as her physical strength did not decrease, her husband was not rendered specially anxious. One fresh October morning, as he made ready to ride away to the station, he noticed with keen delight how much brighter was the light in her eyes, and how much stronger she seemed.

He had not felt so securely happy for many weeks past, and throughout the early part of the day he remained in this condition. Shortly after two o'clock, as he was finishing an important letter, a telegram was brought to him. Having signed the letter, he opened the thin, brown envelope, while he gave some directions to the clerk who was standing by his side, and in a moment the latter saw him grow deadly pale, the colour ebbing away even from his lips. Without a word Armitage hastily left his office and drove with all speed to the station. The telegram form had fluttered on to the floor, and with natural curiosity the clerk took it up and read it; the words ran simply :

'Come at once; an accident has happened;'
and the sender was Dr. Steele.

After luncheon Mona had gone out for a drive. The fresh autumn air revived her, and she felt that mild exhilaration which comes to those who are forced to be much indoors when once they get surrounded by a rapid current of keen air. Skirting the Firnie woods, already seeming sombre and dark in contrast with the

glowing foliage of the beeches, oaks, limes, and chestnuts, the carriage rolled rapidly along, and Mona caught many of those delightful glimpses with which every country ramble or drive is replete. In the frequent meadows patient cows stood, the breath in the frosty air hanging in visible clouds of vapour above their nostrils; here and there were groups of Highland cattle, brown, long-haired, and shaggy, and with huge horns, the use of which the gentle black-brown eyes belied. At frequent intervals along the wayside hung great trailing snowy masses of the traveller's-joy, and in the hedge-rows the robins and the finches were already being tempted by the abundant plenty of scarlet hips and haws. The air seemed able to transmit sound to an exceptionally long distance. Deep in the beechwoods over the meadows to the right Mona heard a blackbird singing loudly and continuously his broken autumnal song, with that electric thrill in its note which is the essence of bird-music; and from every moorland patch that supported a few clumps of gorse or whin or heather came the sweet familiar cry

of the yellow-hammer. Far away, from some village hamlet, resounded faintly the barking of a dog, and now and again swelled upon the air the lowing of milch cows, or the tinkling of sheep-bells as the old wethers guided the flock from dewy hollow to sloping down, and from the downs to more barren declivities which yet held patches of sweetest hill-grass between the rib-like spurs of grey trap. As the carriage passed the woods that formed the southern boundary of Lord Ratho's estate she noticed how they had taken on almost a monotone of dull gold; here and there, indeed, was a touch of crimson, of russet, and even of vigorous green, but the great mass of colour was of orange-yellow. Above these, or rather above some russet-toned beeches further in, Mona caught a glimpse of a hawk hanging motionless in the sky; it seemed to poise there without effort, neither ascending nor descending—more like some sky-flower that had its sustenance only in the air, and that, rootless, was drifted about by every passing wind above, but never down upon the green earth below. As Ratho Hill was surmounted,

the Tay valley was seen in all its beauty, never lovelier than in the autumn. Then swiftly the horses, recognising their homeward directions, dragged their not very heavy weight after them, and soon they had reached the summit of Dunluiart Rise, whence Firnie Knowe lay two miles away beyond its fir-woods.

Some gipsies had been hanging about the neighbourhood for an hour or two past, having probably heard at Firnie Lodge or elsewhere some particulars about Mrs. Armitage, and being desirous of making something by a pleasant prophecy. But they had chosen their place badly, for it was behind a bend of the road, while still in the slope from Dunluiart Rise, so that under any circumstances a carriage could hardly have been drawn up at that point. Possibly the gipsies had anticipated this, however, on the ground that they would be better able to run after the carriage if it should show no signs of stopping. As it drew near the bend in the road the coachman rashly omitted to put down the drag, and with a heavy swing the

carriage spun round the corner. At the same moment a couple of wild-looking figures sprang towards it on either side, apparently right out from the thick-leaved hedgerows; against one of them the carriage swung, and the swarthy Gitani was hurled back in the hedge. With a wild snort one of the horses reared and fell, struggling so frantically that its neighbour was dragged also down at the same moment that the carriage reeled heavily and fell to the side with a crash. The coachman, who had been precipitated into a dry ditch to the left, sustained no damage, and was able to see to his mistress at once. Mona, lying beside the carriage, apparently alive and unhurt, seemed to the man to have escaped by a miracle; but when he found that his utmost endeavours to restore her to consciousness failed he became much alarmed.

The gipsies were looking on with a curious dull gaze, bewildered apparently by the suddenness of the catastrophe; but, seeing the plight of the lady, one of them, the fortune-teller of the company, came slowly forward and knelt

beside Mrs. Armitage. Taking the latter's head in her lap, she opened her eyelids, but found the orbs glazed and expressionless, when, hastily calling out some Zingari phrase to an old woman, she began rubbing her hand backward and forward over Mona's left breast. In a minute or less the old woman came up with a small clay bottle, taking which in her hand the fortune-teller placed it to Mona's lips, and forced some of the contents into her mouth. No effect, however, was produced. Seeing this the woman sprang to her feet calling out to the coachman—

‘I thought she was only in a bad faint, but I'm thinking she must have struck her head against the hard road or against the wheel as she fell. It may bring her trouble on, poor thing, so the sooner she's at home the better. What shall we do?’

Peters, the coachman, had stood awkwardly by while the woman was endeavouring to restore his mistress, but the moment he was appealed to he became clear-sighted and alert.

‘Look you, mistress, you're a kindly-like wo-

man, so I've no hesitation in leaving poor Mrs. Armitage in your care for a bit. One of these horses is no use, I'm afraid, but I'll take the other and ride in at once to Firnie Knowe, and bring out the phaeton to take my mistress home in. And if that lad of yours there will strike across the fields to the Cedars and tell Dr. Steele to come at once he will do us a good turn, which won't be forgotten, I promise you.'

Peters wisely restrained his natural indignation against the gipsies as the chief, if not the sole, cause of the mishap, deferring expression of this till he had got Mrs. Armitage safely home.

In as short a time as possible he was back again with the phaeton, into which Mona, still insensible, was gently laid, the gipsy woman sitting by her side; and when they reached the house they found Dr. Steele awaiting them. A moment's glance showed the doctor how serious the case was, so he sent off a messenger at once with a telegram to Armitage. When Hew arrived at Firnie Knowe he was met at the door by Dr. Steele. The latter's face was very grave,

but he put as favourable a light as he could on the case as he narrated the particulars.

‘No, my boy, it would not do for you to see your wife at present. I may tell you that I expect she will be in travail to-night at latest.’

‘But she is conscious, isn’t she?’

‘No, Armitage. It is my duty to tell you that I fear there is something else to contend with. She has had concussion of the brain from striking the road or the wheel of the carriage as she fell.’

‘But she will recover! For God’s sake say she will get over it!’

‘She has youth and a fine constitution on her side, so we must hope for the best. I can say nothing more.’

A long and wretched afternoon this proved to Armitage. He walked about from room to room like a restless animal; inside, the stillness seemed insupportable—outside, the glare of the dayshine was maddening, and the cries of the robins shrill and aggravatingly insistent. In one of his short, aimless garden excursions his wandering gaze was arrested by a small snail which was drag-

ging itself and its shelly home over a ripe peach that hung low against the brick wall. What beauty and delicacy there was in the shell, strange that he never noticed it before—thus he thought; but stranger still is that faculty of mind which causes the most strained attention to be concentrated for a moment on some trifling object, a concentration which will so fix the object in the mind that the latter will remain a remembered fact when all the grief or perplexity in which it was noticed has become vaguely unreal or absolutely forgotten.

At last the day passed into twilight, and night, there being no moon visible, seemed to come sooner than usual.

Wearied, Armitage dropped off into a doze as he lay back on the couch of his smoking-room. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious when he awoke with that sensation of something strange or unpleasant having happened, or being about to happen. The lamp in the room had burned low, and there was an oppressive stillness throughout the house. Finding his solitariness no longer supportable, he passed out of the

room and went upstairs. He met no one till he reached the corridor, where were the rooms of his wife and himself. Then suddenly he heard a faint, thin crying issuing from the chamber wherein Mona lay, and knew that another child had been born into the world.

While he stood in the dark hesitatingly, the door opened, and Dr. Steele came forth. Taking Hew's arm, he walked away from the corridor, and until they reached the smoking-room not a word passed between them.

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

WHEN Dr. Steele and Armitage reached the smoking-room, the former noticed that his companion's face was deadly pale, and that he was evidently bracing himself up to meet some unexpected shock.

‘A child has been safely born, and the mother has not succumbed, as I half feared.’

‘Thank God for that! But I see you have something more to tell me. Do not keep me in suspense.’

‘Well, my dear friend, I fear that your wife has sustained some mental injury owing to the fall. In ordinary circumstances the concussion she received would not have proved very serious,

but in the present instance it has entailed very serious results. She *may* throw the injury off in a short time.'

'Do you mean that Mona's mind is deranged?'

'It is unhinged, and the evil will manifest itself in a special way.'

'Do speak more clearly, Steele!'

'I fear that for a time you must not expect to see her. Some strange and unaccountable freak has caused her to regard you with feelings either of great fear or great dislike. I know how easy it is to say so, but you must be patient, Hew, my boy. It will pass away in time, I have no doubt; but in the meantime I must assure you that I cannot answer for the consequences if you enter your wife's room.'

'But what, in heaven's name, could cause Mona to take such an extraordinary dislike to me? When did this feeling manifest itself? Surely it would disappear the moment she sees me again?'

'I have already told you it is one of those strange mental freaks for which there is no accounting. But it will comfort you to hear

that more than one such case has occurred in my own experience, and that in each instance the patient regained her mental equilibrium as soon as her physical strength was established. But you must not think of such a thing as venturing into her room on the chance that she might experience a revulsion of feeling. It is my conviction that such a course would either kill her or totally unhinge her mental faculties. As for the time she first manifested this strange state of feeling, it was when she recovered her consciousness after the accident. She knew that her child was about to be born, and, thinking that it would be pleasant to her to hear, I mentioned that you had been telegraphed for and would be here immediately—an announcement which, to my consternation, she received with every sign of excited aversion. No, you must just have patience, Armitage, and trust that all will come right in the end.'

This new trial was hard to bear, yet, now that he knew Mona's life was not in danger, Armitage realised how greatly he had dreaded her illness, and the revulsion of feeling enabled him to look

with more equanimity on an unpleasant state of things which, however, he felt assured, would only be temporary. Their child was a girl, and seemed in no way to have suffered from the shock of the carriage accident; but it was with feelings more akin to pain than pleasure that Hew at times took the little thing in his arms, for he could not help feeling that she was the material symbol of that which kept husband and wife at present apart. He saw little of her, however, but was satisfied when he heard that it was because Mona grew restless and unhappy when her babe was long away. They did not tell him that she could not bear the idea that the child was in his arms.

In vain Dr. Steele endeavoured to find if by any possibility there was some real cause for any misunderstanding on the wife's part, but only with the result that he became thoroughly convinced that Mona's head had been affected by the shock of the accident, and that she had taken this extraordinary dislike on account of some strange derangement, which he could not, in the meantime, see his way to affect. He

knew that this partial derangement might go as suddenly as it had originated, but, on the other hand, that it might develop into an engrossing idea as irremovable as the most confirmed form of monomania.

A week had passed, and Armitage had not yet seen his wife, or, rather, she had not seen him—for, overcome by his longing to look on her dear face again, he had ventured into her room one night when assured by the nurse that Mrs. Armitage was asleep. Mona had dozed gently again while holding her baby in her arms, and she looked more beautiful than Hew had ever thought her before. But even if he had not promised the nurse to remain only a few moments, he could hardly have controlled himself to remain quiet during a longer period, for the tears of love and pain burned in his eyes, and he felt that if only Mona would waken and look upon him her strange illusion would pass away at once. But, with the remembrance of Dr. Steele's emphasised warning, he knew that he must risk nothing.

A month dragged wearily on for Hew Armistage. He heard daily good general reports as to the health of mother and child, but even Dr. Steele no longer dared to mention his name to Mona, on account of the fearfully excited state it threw her into.

One day he broached the subject suddenly, so that her nerves might not be unstrung by the unpleasant process of his feeling the way.

‘My dear friend,’ he said, ‘you must listen to what I have got to say to you. As your physician, I am bound to tell you that your carriage accident is responsible for a slight and temporary mental derangement, which takes the form of a most painful hallucination. You know that I speak of your present feeling towards your husband. Now, in the first place, you ought to take my word for this—then, if you find that in your present state your hallucination (for hallucination it is, in spite of your gesture of dissent) proves too strong for your resolution, I think it is your duty to tell me on what grounds it is based, and to what it points. Remember, I am not asking you to

see Hew at present, nor will I so endeavour, until I knew the time has arrived when it can be done without hurting you ; but you must see yourself that the present state of affairs is impossible of continuance for any length of time.'

'Yes, it is impossible,' replied Mona, quietly. Beyond a steadily-growing paleness, and a just perceptible nervous tremor about the mouth while Dr. Steele was speaking, she seemed quite composed.

'Well, do not you believe my word that you are labouring under an hallucination?'

'I believe that you believe so.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes. *You* speak according to your knowledge ; *I* act according to mine.'

'You know that you may trust me absolutely, Mona Armitage. Tell me in what way and on what grounds you are feeling as you do.'

'I can tell you nothing. Dr. Steele, I insist on your not referring to this subject again. If you do, I will have to decline see-

ing even you, and you must know how deeply I should regret being forced into any such course.'

Mona had scarcely finished speaking ere her voice broke in wild sobs, and, throwing herself back on her sofa, shook as with some despairing agony.

After this Dr. Steele determined to let her hallucination die a natural death, which he felt assured it would do if she were not confronted with her husband in the meantime.

But as in the outer world there cannot be great disturbances without the compressed forces of Nature finding a safety-valve somewhere, in the whirlwind or the thunder or the volcano, so it is in the smaller world of human life. The dual current of Hew's and Mona's married life had reached a point where it was met with unexpected obstructions. If it evaded or overcame these all might be well, but if the difficulties proved too great the current would be split into two, one perhaps passing into waste marshes, and the other dashing headlong over precipitous rocks into some deep chasm.

The first day of approaching winter had arrived, and the ground was white, even throughout the sunny noon, with crisp hoar frost. Later on the sky grew grey, and a few flakes of snow began to fall.

When Armitage reached the little station about five o'clock, it was already dark, and the cold had become intense, though there were symptoms that the sudden frost would evaporate soon in a storm of wind or rain. He had come by an earlier train than he had intended, so neither his horse nor his drag was awaiting him. However, the distance was not so great but that he was rather glad of the opportunity in which to walk off his weariness and apprehension, if possible. But as he strode along the Dunhuiart Road his spirits, instead of rising, fell lower and lower. There was something very depressing in this sudden wintry gloom. Everything was silent, for the frost had already become so far arrested that there was audible nothing of that crackling which is to be heard on even the stillest winter's day when the ground is frozen. The robins,

sheltered in the hedges, sat close, and made not even the faintest twittering. Armitage realised that never before had he witnessed the death-likeness of winter so strikingly manifested.

In addition to the darkness, a thick mist had risen from the low meadows that skirted the road before its gradual rise to Firnie. Two or three times Hew stumbled over some large stone or heavy rut, and as the mist deepened into a fog, that shut out the stars and prevented his seeing a yard in front of him, he frequently wished that he had not neglected to telegraph for the dog-cart.

He was about the last man to succumb to baseless superstitious fears, nor did such at present beset him; but he felt an almost intolerable depression, an apprehension which he could by no effort shake off.

‘A nice night in which to meet some desperate character,’ he muttered, below his breath, instinctively grasping his stick as he did so.

The road at this point had been newly

strewn with rough clinkers, so he left it for the slip of turf that ran along the hedge to the left. Along this he walked like a shadow, only distinguishable from such by the dull light in his eyes and the breath that hung before his mouth.

Hark! what was that? In front of him he distinctly heard a sudden sound like a foot upon gravel.

Stopping, he listened intently. A minute passed, and, no further sound making itself heard, he advanced slowly. Again! Distinctly the clinkers that were scattered along the turfed side-path had been crunched by the foot of some person—and this time quite close. Hew had himself kicked aside a stone even as his ear caught the sound of the second footstep, and apparently the person in front of him had heard it, for there was such an absolute stillness that any except the most guarded footstep would inevitably be heard.

Strangely enough, it did not occur to Armitage that most probably the person in front of him was some belated traveller, or possibly one

of the gardeners or other people in service at Firnie Knowe; his nervous system had been so strained of late that even an ordinary incident seemed to him pregnant with exaggerated significance. Still, even allowing for this, there was something unpleasant, if not actually alarming, in his present circumstances. In vain he endeavoured to pierce the impenetrable veil which night and fog had together wrought. He felt convinced that some one was in front of him, yet uncertain as to whether that person knew of his proximity or not. Stepping forward with such extreme caution that even his own footsteps were inaudible, he stopped abruptly as he fancied he heard the sound of quick breathing close at hand.

The mist grew denser still, so that he could not see his own hands unless held close to his face, and then only in shadowy outline. He realised how helpless a blind man must be even in a locality with which he was acquainted.

Another step and he stumbled over the crouching body of a man, who at once

grappled with him in a sudden, speechless, savage struggle.

Hew felt that his antagonist, if a smaller man, was remarkably lithe and powerful. All around brooded the deep fog, obscurer than the most absolutely starless and moonless night; not a sound came from roadside or meadow; not an owl swooped through the dense atmosphere; not a dog barked in the distance; not a breath of wind stirred even a single withered leaf. Not a sound either was emitted by the two men who struggled there in the darkness, save their panting breaths and the scraping of their feet against the ground as they wrestled with all their strength for mastery. At length the superior force of Armitage gained the upper hand; but his opponent's powers of resistance were too obstinate to give way even after the ultimate result was inevitable. Hew realised that if the latter had had an accomplice he himself would have stood no chance of his life; as it was he was taxed to the uttermost to clench his victory.

Slowly he bent the man backward, then with

a sudden twist hurled him to the ground, and held him there with an iron grasp on his throat, while he knelt on either arm so as to prevent the man snatching any weapon from his belt. He had conquered at last, but how was he to find out who his opponent was,

‘Who are you?’ he cried, hoarsely; then, feeling that the man could not speak because of his throttling grasp, he relaxed his hold on his throat.

‘Take your hands away from me, James Murdoch, and don’t add murder to your other crimes.’

‘What the devil do you mean? To whom are you speaking?’

‘I’m speaking to you, James Murdoch, and you know well what I am saying.’

‘And who may you be, pray?’

‘My name is Gavin, and, as you probably know, it is that of a certain detective-officer.’

‘Get up, and let us get out of this cursed fog!’

Mr. Gavin did get up with amazing alacrity,

but, brave man though he was, he hardly dared to put the handcuffs on his late opponent, knowing the fate he would almost certainly meet if he did. But it was a mystery to him what Murdoch meant, and how he risked keeping in such company: it must be with some treacherous design—was it to lead him towards some quagmire, or perhaps deep pool, where a murdered man might be thrown in with comparative safety against discovery? Gavin did not know the locality thoroughly, and there might easily be such places, of which he had caught no glimpse hitherto. What a fool he was not to have brought that revolver; but he felt comforted as by a stealthy search he found that his large clasp-knife was in his pocket. Opening this, he kept it in readiness, determined not to be taken at a disadvantage. As his companion vouchsafed no communication, he kept silence also; and so the two men walked silently onward side by side for about half-a-mile.

Gavin was puzzled at their keeping to the road, but was still more so when his companion knocked at the door of a cottage, which the

former could only guess to be the lodge of Firnie Knowe.

The wife of the head-gardener opened the door, and in the sudden flood of light the detective, to his intense amazement, beheld Hew Armitage in place of the James Murdoch with whom he imagined he had been struggling.

‘Give me that lantern there, Susan. It’s so thick that I can’t see my way up the avenue.’

Had he been a little less excited or preoccupied, he would have noticed that the woman was in tears, and that she looked at him strangely. Gavin noticed this, and as soon as they had left the lodge he spoke.

‘I wonder what’s the matter with the gardener’s wife, sir. Did you see that she was crying, and that she looked at you strangely?’

‘My good friend, fancy being astonished at a woman being in tears! And, as for her looking at me strangely, I have no doubt I don’t look very reputable after our little tussle down the way. How on earth was it that you came to be lying where you did, and that you mis-

took me for somebody else?—and, by-the-by, who is James Murdoch, and what do you know about him?’

‘It’s rather an unpleasant story, sir, so if it’s all the same to you, we’ll wait till we get to the house, especially as your grip has given me rather a turn, and I ’ud be none the worse of a drop o’ whisky.’

‘Come on, then,’ replied Armitage, impatiently, and in a few minutes the two men were inside Firnie Knowe.

Leading the way into the smoking-room, where a bright fire was burning, he motioned the detective to be seated, and to help himself to the spirits that stood on a side table.

‘Now, Gavin, let me hear what you have to say, and excuse my seeming abruptness in hurrying you thus, but I feel worried and tired to-night, and have some things I want to see to at once.’

‘Well, sir, I will tell you what I have to say as briefly as possible, only premising that you must bear with me to the end, however much you may feel disinclined to hear me out

—for my communication is not a pleasant one.

‘I have for some time past, but in vain, been endeavouring to lay my hands on a certain Mr. James Murdoch. This person is well-connected in Edinburgh, and once held a good enough position in an insurance-office there, which he lost by embezzlement. The matter, however, was hushed up, and Murdoch suffered no other evil from it than being turned adrift alike by the Company and by his friends. Beyond several disreputable but not legally criminal incidents in his subsequent life in Edinburgh we know nothing further than that about a year ago he went to London, where all trace of him was lost. It was only after much roundabout procedure that I learned that it was this very person who had presented the notes at various banks in Edinburgh—the notes, I mean, that were paid in Dundee in return for the forged cheque. I strongly suspected that he was acting in concert with some one else, and my suspicions became confirmed when I found that he was seen twice in Firnie Wood. I could

have had him arrested on suspicion, but it might have led to nothing; and, moreover, there was a reason why I had to proceed with the utmost caution, a reason other than that connected with the actual capture of the guilty person. That Murdoch was in this instance a partial dupe, I felt certain; anyhow, I never for a moment imagined him to be the forger. The man I set to watch him in Edinburgh turned out to be a fool at his trade, and lost sight of him on two occasions that might have led to something important. On the first he traced Murdoch to a low music-hall, and there he overheard him say to a woman in his company that she needn't cut up rough, as he had a sweetheart in the country who was not only a lady of rank, but who gave him as much money as he wanted.

‘Wait a minute, Mr. Armitage, you needn't rise to ring the bell. You *must* hear what I've got to say—believe it or not as you like.

‘Well, on hearing this the man came back to the office to report—but when he went again to

Gordon Street, where Murdoch was lodging, he found the bird had flown. Probably the latter had left the town, or he may have been in close hiding, but in any case we lost sight of him for close upon three weeks, when one day the same constable—in plain clothes, of course—having caught sight of him at the Princes Street Station, followed him to the Clarendon Café, which the latter entered in company with the same gentleman to whom he had been speaking at the station. They were about ten minutes inside, and when they issued again they sprang at once into a hansom, and got clean away before our fool of a new hand even noticed the cab-number. Here was occasion number two lost. A thorough search was instigated, but at last I had to come to the conclusion that Murdoch was not in Edinburgh.

‘What I have now got to say may or may not have any weight with you. One day I received an anonymous letter which I am bound to say I had every reason to believe a genuine communication. It practically advised me to

concentrate my attention upon some one *within* Firnie Knowe. I did so, and with the following results :

‘ Firstly, I found that Mrs. Armitage had been seen on three separate occasions walking with a stranger in Firnie Wood.

‘ Secondly, on one of these occasions she was overheard to say to her companion (whom my informant did not see sufficiently well to describe), “ You must not drive me too far,” and he replied to the effect that she had enough and to spare, and that “ there would be a fine scandal some day, anyhow.”

‘ Thirdly, after many inquiries, I found that frequently of late a strange gentleman had put up for a night or so at the “ Grasston Arms,” at the small village of Grasston, four miles to the north of Firnie Wood.

‘ Fourthly, having left instructions that I should be communicated with at once if the gentleman came again, I one night lately got a telegram to say that he was there. But, as Grasston is not a telegraphic place, the message had come in a roundabout way, and had reached

me too late to be of any good that night, so all I could do was to arrange to leave Dundee (where I unfortunately was at the time) the first thing the following morning. When I reached the "Grasston Arms" I found that my gentleman had gone. Naturally I was much chagrined, but I made two subsequent discoveries which recompensed me after all. On searching the bed-room in which he had slept, I noticed that he had had a fire the night previous, and I also saw that below the fire-place lay some charred and half-burnt fragments of paper. Among these I found a partially-destroyed envelope, upon which, however, I could make out the addressee's name, viz., "James Murdoch." I forgot to tell you that the gentleman had been known at the "Grasston Arms" under the name of Armstrong. Later in the day I came upon a second important link. By a lucky chance question of a boy whom I met in the road, a cow-boy to Farmer Johnstone of the Lees, I learned that the lad had been going a message to Firnie Knowe, and that as he went along he kept tossing a penny from

hand to hand. In the twilight he missed his clasp once, and the penny shot into the hedge to his left. Determined not to lose it, he dived in among the hips and haws, but, not finding it, fell a-crying and ultimately asleep. When he woke up he found it quite dark, save for the moonlight that lay along the fields. He was just going to creep out of the hedge when he saw a man coming stealthily along Firnie Road, seemingly expectant for some interview; but after hanging about for some few minutes he proceeded, followed by the lad, till he came to Firnie Knowe avenue. In the darkness caused by the trees, the man was suddenly lost to view, though the boy (who evidently thinks now that he witnessed something supernatural) assured me that he vanished into the air. All that the lad could tell me further was, that he *thought* he heard a low whistle, and that, as later on he ventured to draw near to the house itself, he was certain he saw a woman pass through the shrubbery.

‘Fifthly, on examination of the shrubbery close to the house, I did find something—a

woman's lace handkerchief, with the initials
M. C. A.

‘And, sixthly, having this afternoon heard that the person calling himself Armstrong had again turned up at the “Grasston Arms,” and that he had gone out for the evening, as he said, I concluded I would wait in Firnie Road and see what luck I would have. I had not long hidden myself in the hedge before the dense mist came down, and as I feared that Murdoch *alias* Armstrong might slip past me unheard, as well as unseen, I determined to go on to Firnie Knowe, and wait in the avenue close to the house. It was while doing this that I fancied I heard a step on the gravel behind me ; hearing nothing further, I stooped to the ground, so as to catch the least vibration of sound ; and, just as I became assured that some one was near, you stumbled over me, and I thought that I had got hold of Mr. Murdoch with a vengeance.

‘There, Mr. Armitage, that is what I have got to tell you. What conclusion would you draw yourself, sir, if you were reporting on a wholly impersonal case ?’

‘I think your argument weak from first to last, Mr. Gavin, and I am quite convinced that, on at any rate one or two points, you have been, intentionally or unintentionally, misled, I grant, however, that there is something mysterious about this Mr. Murdoch. Well, tell me frankly what your suspicions lead to.’

‘What I have just told you, sir, convinces me in my belief that the person who abstracted and forged the cheque was Mrs. Armitage.’

‘When I stop your speaking further, Mr. Gavin, it is not because I feel your remark an insult, for, in the first place, you do not know my wife, and, in the next, I believe that you announce your judgment reluctantly, but I do so because I feel it is an utter waste of time to discuss the matter. What you say is wholly impossible. If you had tried to prove to me Mrs. Armitage loved some one in a way that she had no right to do, I might have been at first startled into suspicion, but what you suggest is, as I have said, wholly impossible. To show you how absolutely I disbelieve you, I request you to lose no time in finding out something

more about this person whom you have been tracking. He may be on Firnie Road by this time.'

At this moment a knock came to the door, and a piece of paper was handed by the servant to Mr. Gavin. It was from the landlord of the 'Grasston Arms,' and was to the effect that he had just had a telegram from Dundee from Mr. Armstrong to say that the latter would be unable to return as arranged, and adding that no baggage had been left by the gentleman.

'Missed him again,' muttered the detective, in a tone of intense chagrin.

'Well, Gavin, what are you going to do now?'

'This may be a hoax also, but I'll risk it, and go back to Dundee at once. I may come across him there. But I'm as absolutely convinced as before as to whose door the main guilt should be laid at.'

'You may go, Mr. Gavin. I decline to discuss the subject ;' and even as Armitage spoke the officer bowed stiffly and left the room.

Rising wearily, Hew went and stood by the fire, buried in thought. Some minutes passed thus before he rang the bell, and when the servant appeared asked if Mrs. Andrews, the nurse, were upstairs or down.

‘She is downstairs, sir,’ said the man, who seemed nervous and excited.

‘Anything the matter, Williams?’

‘No, sir—yes, sir—I mean no, sir. I’ll tell Mrs. Andrews to speak to you, sir?’

‘Yes.’

In a minute or two the nurse appeared, and in very evident trepidation.

‘Mrs. Andrews, how is my wife to-day?’

‘She was all right when I last saw her, sir; and stronger than I’ve ever known her, though she seemed strange and excited like. That was about noon.’

‘Do you mean to say you haven’t seen her since noon? Has she been alone since then?’

But all Mrs. Andrews did, by way of reply, was to burst into tears and sob demonstratively.

‘What in heaven’s name does this mean,

woman? Speak out at once. Is there anything the matter with Mrs. Armitage?’

‘Oh, sir, don’t ask me, don’t ask me! I’m all flutter, sir, and—and—I—I—I,’ and here Mrs. Andrews’ grief burst out afresh.

Furiously ringing the bell, Armitage was answered so rapidly as to suggest there having been some one at the door beforehand.

‘Williams, what is the matter with this woman? Is she mad, or drunk, or what? Speak out at once, man; I’m in no humour for any nonsense.’

‘Forgive me, sir, but none of us know what’s become of Mrs. Armitage. She left the house shortly after noon in the pony phaeton, taking the baby with her, in charge of Nellie, the third housemaid. About an hour or so later, Nellie, turned up again, saying that her mistress had never spoken a word to her all the way, till at last she suddenly pulled up the pony and ordered Nellie to get out and go home. The girl hardly knew what to do, but she was frightened, and so did as she was told. Then Mrs. Armitage drove on, and we heard nothing

more till about an hour ago Maxwell, the carrier, told us that he had seen the pony walking sedately along before the *empty* phaeton, and that as he wasn't busy he turned and brought it back to Firnie Knowe. He saw nothing of Mrs. Armitage. Dr. Steele had just left the house, sir, and had ridden off before you came in, in the direction that Nellie saw her going when she was told to leave the phaeton.'

A sudden great fear fell upon Hew. Nothing definite shaped itself in his mind, but only a great dread of the long imminent crisis which had now arrived, for unquestioningly he recognised that the inevitable crisis had now come. He told Williams and the nurse to leave the room, and then walked up and down for some time in what would have appeared to any spectator deep thought, but which was more a sudden and inexplicable mental apathy.

A thought suddenly struck him, and he ran hastily upstairs to his wife's room. Eagerly he looked about, but whatever object he sought was not there. On going into his dressing-

room, his gaze was at once arrested by a small piece of writing-paper pinned to the cloth that lay before the looking-glass. On this paper was written the single word *Farewell*, and the handwriting was that of Mona.

It is almost impossible to foretell how any individual will act during some unexpected and eventful crisis; sometimes the weak become strong, and the strong weak. If Armitage had ever been asked how he would have acted under similar circumstances, he would probably have emphatically stated that his only relief would have been in instantaneous action, and that he would have ceaselessly prosecuted the search after the missing one. As a matter of fact, he sank on a low chair beside the dressing-table, holding the scrap of paper before him, and staring at it with a look of dull despair.

An hour passed, and, urged by the other servants, Williams went upstairs to see if Mr. Armitage wanted anything. Finding the smoking-room empty, he looked into the other rooms in succession, but seeing that his master was in none of them concluded he was

upstairs. With some hesitation he knocked at the dressing-room door, and, receiving no answer, looked in. Armitage was still sitting in a crouching attitude, gazing fixedly but vacantly on the slip of paper he held in his hand.

‘If you please, sir, did you ring?’

No answer.

‘Mr. Armitage, sir!’

No answer.

‘Mr. Armitage,’ (louder) ‘—if you please, sir, can I get you anything, or have you any orders to give me?’

Hew looked up, and said simply,

‘No.’

Another hour passed, another, and another.

A sudden ring of the hall-door bell startled the household, all alert as everyone was for some new development of the mystery. On opening the door Williams let in Dr. Steele, who at once inquired if the man’s master were in and in what room.

‘Any word of Mrs. Armitage, sir?’

‘Show me where Mr. Armitage is, Williams;’

and, without vouchsafing any further answer, Dr. Steele followed till he reached the room in question, when he thanked Williams in a tone that also decidedly said, ‘You need not linger here.’ But just before he turned the handle the servant whispered to him,

‘Mr. Armitage has sat in the same position for the last two or three hours. He seems quite dazed, sir.’

Entering the room, he closed the door behind him, and then walked over beside Armitage, and laid his hand on the latter’s shoulder.

‘Hew, my boy!’

Armitage looked up at the kindly and familiar tone, and for sole reply handed the doctor the scrap of paper—‘*Farewell.*’

Dr. Steele repressed a sigh as he wondered what terrible significance lay in this word in this instance. What did it point to—madness, death, dishonour? Not the last, surely, whatever Mona might be; and yet how horribly some things pointed thereto. It was not without difficulty that he succeeded in rousing Hew

from his apathetic despair, and then only when he said that a slight but possible clue had been discovered.

‘What? Tell me what you know—tell me what you think,’ Hew cried, springing to his feet.

‘Mona told Nellie to leave her when they were passing North Ratho, a short distance from where the road diverges into four forks. When I reached this point on horseback I followed the Dunluiart Road, the same upon which the carrier discovered the phaeton and pony, but when I came to Dunluiart I found that no stranger had passed through the village that day. I felt convinced that your wife had not taken either of the eastern roads, because both are at present so muddy and rutted as to be almost impassable, so I struck across the fields to the Grasston Road, and soon reached the village, but there also I failed in getting any information. Remembering that a carrier’s coach ran twice a week from Grasston to Perth *viâ* Glencarse and the scattered hamlets *en route*, I looked in at the “Grasston Arms” to learn if a

lady had left that day, but was assured that there were no travellers at all, the landlord, moreover, remembering that the carrier had complained of dull times, and that he did not expect to get a single traveller this turn. I was just having a little whisky and water before leaving, when one of the stablemen came in for a light to his pipe, remarking, after he had nodded good-evening to the landlady, that old John (by whom he meant the carrier) had got a passenger, after all.

“How was that?” asked the landlord.

“Weel, I was just returnin’ frae Smawoodie with the bay mare when I saw auld John’s machine come bobbin’ along the road. To my surprise a leddie cam’ oot frae Grasston Woods an’ stoppit auld John—at least she mauna ha’e been a leddie, ye ken, but I thocht sae at the time. Whaun I gaed by them I couldna see her for the wood, but I nodded to auld John, wi’ a wink, as much as to say that he was in luck after all, but the grumpy auld carle only mumbled oot, ‘Sma’ luck’s better than nane.’”

“So you see, Armitage, this points to a double

conclusion, granting that the carrier's passenger was Mona—firstly, that no mischance has happened to her; and, secondly, that she has gone away alone.'

'It may be so, Steele, but I have little hope of it. Mona could have gone away with much greater speed and safety from some railway-station in the districts round about, and in Perth she would be traced as easily as in Firnie. Then what could she be doing in Grasston Woods, miles away from where she left the phaeton? and I don't believe Mona ever knew that a carrier's coach went from Grasston to Perth, or at any rate the days upon which it did so. And, lastly, the stableman made no mention of the woman he saw having a baby with her, and, whatever else Mona may have done, I am convinced she would not have parted with her child. And yet, I don't know. I feel as if I were arguing against reason.'

'Partly from a mistake of mine, Armitage, for I forgot to add that I asked the stableman if the woman had a baby, and he replied that, if she hadn't, she had something very

like one, as she had a bundle in her arms, besides a small black bag which she carried in one hand.'

'Then let us go at once. The last train has passed; but if we get the dog-cart out we'll reach Perth earlier than if we waited for the morning express. But, no, my good kind friend, you are already tired out. You stay here, I pray, and, if anything should occur in my absence, all will be well in your hands.'

As Dr. Steele *was* very much exhausted with his unwonted exertion and excitement, he was forced to agree to this, and lay down accordingly as soon as Armitage had left.

As the light vehicle sped through the darkness, Hew felt as though he lived only in the present, as if a future were as remote from him as his past.

On, on, past shadowy clumps of trees and shrouded hedgerows, past strong-smelling turnip-fields and low, wayside cottages—every yard, he prayed, a link in the chain that would connect him again with Mona. As he neared

the North Grasston by-way, which ran across the Perth Road, his ears caught the rapid beat of a horse's hoofs in full gallop. Nearer and nearer the latter came. Armitage tightened his grasp on the reins as he approached the point where the main road was bisected by the other, and sharply checked the horse's speed as he saw that the rider would cross a moment or so before he would. The moon was shining with a wet, murky gleam, but its light was strong enough to let him recognise the rider's face as the latter sped northward in furious haste. Armitage sprang to his feet in the swaying dog-cart, and shouted out, with fierce energy, 'Come back!' but the rider either did not hear, or paid no attention, and in a few moments even his horse's gallop grew indistinct. The horseman was Charles Leith.

CHAPTER VI.

HONOUR OR DISHONOUR.

THE sight of Leith had aroused a wild fury in Armitage : but just as he was about to turn the horse's head up the North Grasston Road and lash the animal into swift pursuit, a double flash of reason prevented him from this foolishness. In the first place, he could never make up on Leith, he in a dog-cart and the latter well-mounted, as Armitage had half unconsciously noted ; and in the next, here was evidence that Leith was not with Mona. No, he would hurry on to Perth.

On, on again. Rousing quiet little hamlets into startled attention, and frightening more than one poacher as he and his comrades lurked

near some forest boundaries. An hour later and Morphett was reached, and at the 'Athole Arms' a fresh and good horse obtained. Then on once more along the flat, long road, looking from a distance like a flying cloud-shadow more than a thing of actuality. Armitage could not shake the coincidence of meeting Leith out of his mind.

'Curse him,' he muttered. 'I thought he had been disposed of for good, yet here he is again, and this night of all nights. Where was he coming from when they had passed each other? Grasston and Firnie lay behind him, so if he had not long left either of these places he could not possibly have been in the company of Mona.' Armitage's thoughts revolved constantly round this central fear as the moths circle round a single flame in a dark room. 'Could a message have been given him of vital importance? Was he going to meet *some one* at a changed rendezvous, and, if so, where was the latter? Let me see; is there an inn at North Grasston? No. So it could hardly be there, unless all risks were recklessly run. What lies

beyond the hamlet? Nothing but the long country road and a few cottages, and one or two private houses on estates; nothing till the railway line is reached, with small stations at long intervals at which few trains stop. Wait a moment—there's Rothel Junction, where even the mail-express will wait for a first-class passenger for the south. What if Leith was hurrying thither to join the night-mail? He would be in Perth from two to three hours at least before I'll get there, and if Mona were at the station they would be in Glasgow or Edinburgh before any telegraphic message could be flashed along the lines. Good Heavens, what am I thinking of! I must be mad indeed to allow such thoughts to take possession of me. Yes, Mona, my darling, if there's insanity in the question, it is I who am insane. Mad, mad a dozen times over to doubt you.'

Two o'clock! He heard the hour sounded from the bell-tower of some unseen village church. At this hour it is well-known that a change in the weather for better or worse is more significant than at any other time; and

now the sky began to clear, and the moon in her crescent shone forth with a mellower light. Hew noticed this, and took it as a good omen, further encouraging himself by repeating that the dawn lay behind this promise. Did he think it was summer-time that already he looked for the dawn, which would not yet be for hours?

At last, as the dog-cart breasted a rising and turned to the left, a glimpse was to be caught of faintly glimmering lights—the lights of Perth. Half-an-hour later he drove up to the chief hotel, and astonished the stableman by asking if a lady with a child were staying in the house.

‘I’ll ring the night-bell for ye, sir, and I daresay the waiter will be able to tell ye,’ replied the man, suiting his action to his words, and adding inwardly, ‘What’s the go now, I wonder? P’r’aps she’s a runaway from him, or p’r’aps he’s a-joining of her in flight. Parties as arrives before dawn and asks for a lady, with or without a kid, lays themselves open to suspicion, I think.’

Not for many minutes was the night-bell answered, and, when at last the waiter appeared, it was only to sulkily and sleepily assure his disturber that no such person as he sought was in the hotel. From the 'Royal' Armitage went in turn to every hotel and inn in Perth, having first, however, gone to the station and learned that the night-porters there had noticed no lady with a child and without luggage—that is, none who had gone by the late night-mail, but in no one place did he meet with the faintest clue. As a last resource it struck him that he would try the police-office, and see if by any chance some information might there be gained. The officer in charge told him that a thorough search would be made throughout Perth if the gentleman wished, but this Hew declined as now useless, and he was just about to go, when the inspector called to him, saying that possibly Detective Warner might be able to tell him something, but that that personage was at present in his bed, and could not be seen till morning.

'Who is Detective Warner that he should be able more than anyone else to assist me?'

‘He’s in charge of the station at the time of the mail-trains from the north and south coming in. A lot of queer characters passes to and fro, and, as Mr. Warner’s fond of disguising hisself, he has lots of opportunities for finding out odds and ends of useful information. At present he’s keeping a very sharp look-out for certain parties as are certain, sooner or later, to pass this way—so it’s possible he may have taken note of the lady you’re seeking.’

Thanking the inspector, and promising to return about eight o’clock, Armitage walked to the station and lay down on a couch in the waiting-room. How intolerably slowly dragged the time! But at last, worn out with anxiety and fatigue, he dozed off into unconsciousness, forgetting all his troubles in sleep till, as it seemed to him, only a few minutes later, a porter awakened him with the question as to whether he wanted to catch the up or down morning mail, as the latter was just about due.

Looking at his watch, he found it was shortly after six, so he entered the refresh-

ment-bar to have some coffee before he went back to the police-office to see if Mr. Warner could not be induced to appear earlier than eight.

While there, he heard the signal-bell ring, and immediately the shrill whistle of the advancing train screeched through the station. A thought flashed across his mind that perhaps he might recognise some one in it during the four or five minutes it stayed at Perth, and, as the train drew up, his eyes rapidly scrutinised the passengers as they came forth from the carriages labelled 'London,' 'Glasgow,' and 'Edinburgh.' Standing as he was at the entrance to the refreshment-rooms, most of the travellers had almost to touch him in passing, so that he had ample opportunity to look well at everyone, but without a single recognition. When all who had hurried out to get some refreshment had passed him, Armitage walked swiftly to the first carriage, and then passed along the line, looking into each one and glancing at every passenger who had remained. There were not many, and the faces of all of

them were unknown to him, save in one case, where a man, evidently a commercial traveller, was lying full-length along the seat of a second-class compartment, his face hidden in the voluminous rug in which he was enveloped.

‘No one in this train whom I know,’ he murmured to himself, half regretfully and half relieved.

The guards began calling out to the passengers to be seated, and the bell rang, accentuating the general confusion. Armitage strolled back from the van at the rear, and, without intention, found himself stopping opposite the carriage in which lay the man he had noticed and thought to be a commercial traveller. The ticket-collectors had almost finished their inspection, and the station-master was impatient to get the train away, and was only waiting till the last ticket-collector gave the sign.

‘Now then, sir, are you going by this train?’ said a guard to Armitage, and, on hearing his reply in the negative, swung to the door of the compartment opposite which Hew was waiting.

and, standing on the foot-board, demanded his ticket of the sleeping passenger. The latter awoke with surprising rapidity, and did as he was required; the station-master waved his hand and whistled, and the train steamed swiftly out of the station.

But in the brief glimpse Armitage had caught of the 'commercial' passenger's face he recognised features he had seen before. Whose were they—where had he seen them? Perhaps the incident had not the faintest significance, yet why did this face keep haunting him, or, rather, the dim memory of such a face. No, he could not remember; then, seeing that the hands of the great clock now pointed to twenty minutes past six, he walked off in the direction of the central police-office, hoping to find Detective Warner up, and in about a quarter-of-an-hour was introduced to that officer.

He told him what he wanted to find out, and, almost without further questioning, Hew was informed in return that Sub-Inspector Warner had seen a lady and child go by a south train the previous afternoon, not by the English mail,

but either to Glasgow or Edinburgh, he could not say which.

‘The lady had no luggage with her, saving a small black bag. I took particular note of her in case she might be a well-known female thief in disguise (for I am on the look-out for such a party, I may tell you), but I saw at a glance that I had never seen her face before. She was very pretty, about twenty-eight, I should think; but with an anxious look in her face, almost as if she were escaping from something she dreaded. I would have paid more attention to her if I hadn’t had my eyes on the look-out for the special business upon which I was there. One moment, sir,’ he added, ‘excuse my asking, but is your name Armitage?’

‘It is.’

‘Ah, something made me think it must be you. You see, sir, I have just had a telegraphic message from Detective Gavin, of the Dundee branch, telling me to keep my eye on all trains that pass this morning, firstly, for a lady such as I’ve described, and by name Mrs. Armitage, and, secondly, for a person for whom I’ve been

on the look-out some time. Unfortunately, I received this message a great deal too late to be of any use, for it's hardly likely either of them will now be in the late morning mail for the south.'

'By "them" do I infer that you believe the lady and the other person will be found together?'

'Gavin thinks so, but I don't—because I'm sure that it was Mrs. Armitage I saw yesterday afternoon, and I'm still surer that if Mr. James Murdoch had been in the train I should have seen him.'

Murdoch! The very man Hew had seen half an hour ago lying asleep in the second-class carriage. He remembered now where he had seen the face before—it was at the Clarendon Café in Edinburgh, and was the man to whom Leith had spoken the words which the latter had afterwards so glibly explained away. Armitage had repeated the man's name aloud in the sudden rush of memory.

'Why, do you know him, sir?'

'Yes; that is, I saw him once in Edinburgh,

and under circumstances that made me suspicious. Do you agree with Gavin in thinking that this man and my wife are in league ?’

‘I don’t know enough about the case to say what I think, sir ; but, knowing what I do of Murdoch, I should think it very unlikely. Your wife’s a lady, Murdoch isn’t a gentleman, and is an unmistakable blackguard to look at, so there could hardly be any love-affair in the matter. As to the forgery, I can only say I don’t know enough about the case to say *what* I think—but I know that Gavin’s no fool, and his decision has necessarily great weight.’

‘Then I may tell you that Mr. Gavin is utterly on the wrong scent,’ said Hew, quietly.

‘Perhaps so, Mr. Armitage. Anyhow, I should be glad to get a sight of Murdoch, or even to get some clue as to when he was last seen within the last twelve hours.’

‘I can give you that clue. He was in the express that went south half-an-hour ago.’

‘Well, I’m hanged ! So I’ve missed him clean. You are sure it was he—and was he alone ?’

‘To both questions—yes; but I am sorry to say I cannot in the least recall with certainty what portion of the train he was in—though I *fancy* it was in a through London carriage. But there is ample time, surely, to telegraph and catch him?’

‘Oh, we don’t want to catch him, at least not yet awhile. We want to keep him in sight, you understand, for he’ll lead us to other game. But of course we’ll telegraph to London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, though it’s to the first he’s gone, I’m certain. And I will do all that is possible to find out if any of our people have seen or can trace Mrs. Armitage—if she’s still alone it will be much easier. No, sir, I would not recommend you to do this yourself, nor to wait here. You may rest assured that if any trace is found of your wife she won’t be lost sight of again, and you will be telegraphed for at once.’

Leaving instructions that telegrams in such an event should be forwarded to him both at Dundee and at Firnie Knowe, Hew went back to the ‘Royal Hotel,’ and directed the

dog-cart and horse to be sent back by train the same day, and a few minutes later himself caught the Dundee train, having first telegraphed to Firnie Knowe for a horse to be awaiting him.

In due time he was at home again, if, indeed, that place could be called home which seemed to him desolate in the extreme. Everything was to a casual glance the same, and yet to him how different it was—as different as a corpse to the living body. He was met at the door by Dr. Steele, who, in asking if there was any word of Mona, showed that he himself had learned nothing further.

Hew told him all he knew, and both agreed that there was nothing to be done but to wait patiently till something was heard from the detectives.

‘I’ve had Gavin out here again this morning,’ said Dr. Steele, ‘to see if he could make anything out of a mysterious visit we had again last night. You remember your wife’s having once got a fright before by some night intruder’s face appearing at the window of the

morning-room. Well, last night I spilt an oil-lamp there accidentally, and the window was opened a little to let the unpleasant smell escape. One of the servants in passing the door thought she heard some one moving about in the room, though by this time I had left Firnie Knowe for the Cedars, and no one in the house, she was certain, could be in the room ; but, instead of looking in, the stupid lassie went on till she met Williams, and then told him what she had heard. Williams told her she was imagining something, but he went himself to the room and cautiously opened the door. There was no one in the room, but he distinctly heard a step on the gravel-path outside, and, running to the window, caught a glimpse of a man hurrying across the garden in the direction of the avenue. He got the stablemen and gardeners to make a thorough search in the grounds, but without success. The intruder could not have been a big man, nor yet one accustomed to country life, for the imprint of his foot on the beds which he crossed in his hurry is small, and caused by a well-shaped and slight

boot. Gavin has made nothing out of it as yet.'

By midday no news had arrived, so, as much to distract his mind as anything else, but also to nip any scandal in the bud that might arise in the city, Hew went in to Dundee, Dr. Steele promising to remain at Firnie Knowe and communicate with him at once if occasion should arise. He hardly hoped that no word of this fresh trouble had been bruited about, but he trusted that it had not gone beyond his own circle, and if possible his own office, and that it existed only in some very vague form. When he joined the train at Firnie he got a copy of the *Advertiser*, and began glancing mechanically through its columns. But his thoughts did not follow his eyes, and he was just about to throw the paper aside when he caught sight of a paragraph headed 'Another Scandal.' Hastily perusing it, he saw with a flash of anger that it unmistakably pointed to him. It was thus :

'A rumour is current, to which we would not have afforded publicity at present if we had not had reason to give it at least some credence, to

the effect that the wife of one of our most esteemed citizens, and the representative of one of the oldest of our Tayside families, has left her home under peculiarly distressing circumstances. We make no comments on the particulars given by a contemporary beyond regretting that that journal had not contented itself with giving tongue to the scandal, and had seen fit to indulge in supposititious explanations, for we are in a position to state that as yet absolutely nothing is known of the cause or causes which prompted the lady's flight.'

At first Armitage could scarcely restrain his indignation, but on further reflection he came to the conclusion that it was perhaps as well the news had found such direct statement, for it could be rectified in a way that no merely verbal rumour could be. The editor of the *Dundee Advertiser* was known to him a little, and he already felt indebted to him for the way in which the paragraph was worded, and he knew, moreover, that the gentleman in question would not hesitate to publish any denial which Hew formulated.

As soon as the train reached Dundee, Armitage drove to the office of the *Advertiser*. The editor had not yet arrived, but, after a brief interview with the second in command, Hew came forth satisfied that a fitting denial would appear in the next issue.

When Armitage got home that afternoon, he found that Dr. Steele had had to leave, but that nothing material had transpired, the only telegram that had arrived having been one from the Perth police-office stating that as yet no trace had been found of the fugitive, and that, moreover, Murdoch must have changed at Carlisle or elsewhere on the road to London, for there the strictest look-out, as at Glasgow and Edinburgh, had proved unsuccessful.

Dr. Steele had left because he had no wish to see Armitage at present. He now believed that something more than mental aberration was at the bottom of Mona's flight, but he knew that even to hint at this just now would be useless, as well as perhaps endangering the continuance of the friendship between himself and Hew.

The good doctor had been convinced, despite much that had previously occurred to puzzle him, that Mrs. Armitage had gone away under some strange hallucination; but that very day he had received a letter while at Firnie which had caused him the utmost sorrow. He was sitting writing when Williams came in and told him that Jock Mason, the village idiot, had insisted on seeing him.

‘How do you know he wants me, Williams, because the man is deaf and dumb as well as an idiot?’

‘Oh, by certain signs he made, sir,’ replied the man, with a smile of amused remembrance. ‘He wants to hand you something, but he won’t entrust it to me. I think it’s a letter.’

‘Ah, I will see him.’

But all the doctor’s efforts failed to discover the name or sex of the person who had entrusted Jock with the missive. The man either would not or could not understand, and at last the effort to make him comprehend had to be given up in despair.

The letter ran thus :

‘*To Dr. Steele, Firnie Knowe.*

‘Let no vain search be made. Even if found, which is now almost impossible, I could never go back to Firnie Knowe. My guilt is worse than you imagine: it is double-dyed. Forget me, and teach *him* to forget me.

‘MONA.’

The handwriting was that of Mona Armitage, and the inference to be drawn from the note was that *she* had been the guilty person in the matter of the forgery, and that also she had in reality gone away with some man. But what of the fact of taking the baby with her?

Armitage was sitting gloomily in his smoking-room, turning over and over in his mind the old wearisome facts that he already knew by heart. A ring at the door-bell. Was it a telegram, or was it Dr. Steele back, or was it some visitor?

‘A gentleman wishes to see you, sir.’

‘Who is it, Williams?’

‘I don’t know, sir. When I asked his name

he told me to say that he wanted to have a moment with you on urgent private business.'

'That Perth officer, I suppose,' Hew muttered, as he went into the drawing-room.

He started back in undisguised astonishment, in which resentment was quickly blended. Before him stood Charles Leith.

Neither spoke for some moments, the visitor contenting himself with a stiffly polite bow, and the faint, wicked smile that haunted his face when anything amused him. Yet what could have then amused him, unless the aged look on Armitage's haggard face or the sad despair that had already taken possession of his eyes did so?

'To what am I indebted for the honour of this unexpected visit?'

Leith shot a quick, angry glance at his questioner, as if resenting the tone of icy contempt in which he had spoken.

'I have called, sir, to do what lies in my power to justify your wife so far as I am concerned.'

'What have you got to do with my wife?'

said Armitage, with a sudden savage gesture, and advancing a step or two.

‘Do not be in such a hurry, Mr. Armitage. Is it likely that I would have come here if I *had* had anything to do with the flight of Mrs. Armitage. I heard of this event through the papers, and, as from past circumstances I felt convinced that your suspicions would rest on me, I thought it would only be just to myself, as well as fair to Mrs. Armitage, to disprove *that* supposition here in person.’

‘You need not have troubled yourself, Mr. Charles Leith; whatever I may have thought of my wife’s conduct, I never imagined that she could sink to such dishonour as to have even the faintest association in crime with such a person as *you*!’

Armitage’s fierce sneer had its effect, and for a few seconds the two men stood facing each other like a lion and a tiger glaring at each other in mutual defiance. Leith was the first to speak.

‘By heaven! you shall pay for this!’

‘I would to heaven we had met on the open road, and we would have settled our score there. I cannot molest you in my own house, but I can order you out of it, and this I do, peremptorily. Do you hear?’

‘I hear, Mr. Hew Armitage,’ said Leith, with extreme quietness, and with great deliberation, ‘but, before doing so, I may warn you that while you have doubtless had cause to regret many acts in your life, you will have bitter reason to ultimately recognise your present conduct as the greatest folly you have ever committed.’

Without another word he passed from the room, Hew standing aside to let him pass, a scornful smile on his face.

If he could have seen the look on that of Leith as that personage rode down the avenue, he might possibly have felt some anxiety. There was at times something simply devilish in the absolute cruelty of this man’s face, and never more so than now, when, smiling wickedly, he muttered as he struck the branches with his riding-whip,

‘Curse you, Hew Armitage, you’ll suffer more before I’ve done with you. You owe something to me already, I think. Ha, ha! That’s some consolation, anyhow.’

Dr. Steele did not join Armitage that evening, but sent a message to say that he would come in the morning, and an inquiry as to whether anything further had transpired. The horrible inaction oppressed Hew more than anything else. If he could only do something, he said, over and over again to himself—if he could only ride somewhere, or make some physical effort of any kind, but this horrible, chilling patience—it was indeed hard to bear, at times almost intolerable.

The long night passed, partly in fitful slumber and disturbed dreams, mostly in restless tossing to and fro upon the bed. An hour or two before dawn he arose, and, when in due course his horse was brought to the door, rode down to Firnie Station to see if by any chance any telegram were there awaiting him. No, no word at all. How dreary and hopeless it all was. This bitter cold of Nature, did

it not strike into the soul as well as into the body?

Twice during the day he telegraphed to Perth, and twice he heard in reply that absolutely no clue concerning Mrs. Armitage had yet been found. When he reached Firnie Knowe in the afternoon, Williams handed him a letter which had just come. It bore the Dundee post-mark, and the handwriting was unfamiliar, but extremely fine and delicate—so much so that he waited a moment to scrutinise it. Opening the envelope, and glancing at the signature at the end of the note, he read, to his utter perplexity, ‘Charles Leith.’ It ran thus :

‘SIR,

‘ You grossly insulted me when I was at your house last night, and you may rest assured that under ordinary circumstances your insult would either have met with fitting chastisement or have been passed over with the contempt it deserved. I realised, on calm reflection, however, that you are at present hardly in a fit state for argument with one whom

you (for what reason I know not) mistrust ; and, to show you how honestly I am putting aside personal feeling, I now write to tell you that I am still willing to give you the information which I last night came prepared to give. For you were just about to hear some most important news about your wife when your intolerable manner prevented my confiding in you. But I do not wish to cause you further suffering, and pray you to forget the words that I also spoke. I can give you *definite information* about Mrs. Armitage. As, however, it is for her sake I am acting, and not for yours, I will not agree to give you any information unless in strict privacy. As I cannot cross your threshold again, it would be better for us to meet somewhere. Let it be at the base of Ratho Rise, on the North Grasston Road, about nine o'clock to-night. If you refuse to come, you will be the slayer of your wife's reputation, as well as of your own happiness.

‘ CHARLES LEITH.’

CHAPTER VII.

A NIGHT MEETING.

LEITH'S letter was at once a puzzle and an extreme annoyance to Armitage. Was the man in earnest, or was the whole thing a trap? Hew did not like this sudden forgiveness, or this demand for a private interview at such a lonely place as that named. If Leith did not really have any information to give him concerning Mona, what could his object be? It could hardly be to pay back the insult he had received, for this would be too risky a game, however much reliance might be made on some treacherous blow. Was it possible that the whole thing could be the cruel and malicious hoax of a coward? No, thought Armitage, if

Leith has anything to communicate at all, it must be something which will in some way or other signify some good to himself; the difficulty is how much to believe from such a man. Quite possibly, however, he saw Mona on the day or evening of her flight; he may even have traced her, and been hurrying home that night when they had nearly collided at the junction of the North Grasston and Perth roads. By-the-by, went on Armitage, in puzzled mental conjecture, where did Leith live? He had once spoken of friends across the Sidlaws, but, if this were so, what was he doing so often in the neighbourhood of Firnie; and then this letter of his—it was post-marked Dundee. Where would he come from to-night?—certainly not from the last-named place, but perhaps from Grasston? What a mystery the whole thing was, and would he ever find the clue that would lead out of this weary and disheartening maze?

These and similar thoughts kept sovereignty over Hew's mind through the wearisomely long period that had to elapse ere it was time for

him to go and keep his appointment with Leith, for so he had determined to do. It was another bitter drop in his cup of sorrow to hear just before he left the house that Dr. Steele was not feeling well, and would be unable to leave his bed that evening.

‘The curse of my misfortunes has touched even my dear old friend,’ he muttered, half sorrowfully and half angrily.

He had meant to have ridden to the place of meeting, but reflecting that he would have time to be at the Cedars before very late, even if Leith kept him waiting a little, he had the dog-cart brought round, and told Maxwell, the under-groom, to come with him.

In less than an hour he was driving swiftly up to the lower half of the North Grasston Road, and when he was about a hundred yards from the point where it curved to the right he drew the reins and dismounted. ‘Wait here,’ he said to Maxwell, and then proceeded alone round the bend, and along the road till it skirted Ratho Rise. This latter is a conical grassy mound, semicircled by a forest of spruce and

fir, its base standing back from the road at a distance of about fifty yards.

As Armitage walked across the hoar-frosted turf that lay between the road and the bottom of the Rise, he could not help acknowledging to himself that he was glad the moon, though only half-full, was so high in the heavens and cast so brilliant a light; for, though he was about the last man that could be accused of cowardice, there was something in the remoteness of the locality, the sombre darkness of the fir-woods, and the absolute stillness which prevailed, that was enough to put the strongest nerves on a tension on such an occasion as this, when murder was quite possibly entertained by one of the two men about to meet.

Armitage reached the place of meeting, but found no one there, though it was already a few minutes past the time arranged. A great boulder lay almost midway at the base, and against this he leaned and watched the stars scintillating in the black-blue vault above him. Not a sound broke the stillness around him, save an occasional crack in the fir-woods

behind, as some frost-bitten branch gave way and fell to the ground. Once he started violently as he thought he heard a stealthy footstep in the spur of wood beside him, but it was only a rabbit or hare, or perhaps a hungry fox.

Was it, could it be, a hoax? Good heavens, what if this were only a ruse to get him out of the way at some momentous time, or if Leith had some special reason for getting inside Firnie Knowe, and had hit upon this expedient as the best for his purpose. So excited was Armitage by this sudden and startling surmise that he would have waited no longer had he not at that moment heard the clatter of a horse's gallop along the not far distant main road. Yes, it must be Leith, for the sound of the horse's hoofs, though nearer, was more muffled, which showed that the rider had diverged into the turfed and generally swampy North Grasston Road. In a few moments Leith rode right up to where Armitage was standing. Alighting, he led his horse to the edge of the wood that skirted the Rise, and

fastened it by the bridle to a sweeping fir bough; then, turning towards Hew, he apologised for his unpunctuality in a tone of haughty indifference.

‘By my presence here, Mr. Leith, you perceive that I duly received your most unexpected note. May I request that you at once enter into explanations?’

‘It is as well that we should understand each other, Mr. Hew Armitage. If I am willing to give you some most material information about Mona—I beg your pardon, I’m sure—Mrs. Armitage, it is from no wish to enable you to put an end to your present anxiety.’

‘Spare me your irrelative remarks, sir, and come to the point.’

‘Can you guess why I should be willing to communicate certain information to you?’

‘I cannot. Perhaps it is from the extremely kind interest you have always condescended to feel in my wife.’

‘Your sneer amuses, it does not sting. Well, I tell you frankly that I have induced you to come hither to-night for my own ends. It is at

the same time true that your wife's honour hinges upon the result of our interview. I have to tell you, first and foremost, that she has left Firmie Knowe for good.'

'I do not believe it.'

'Very good. Permit me, however, to resume. Mrs. Armitage will never return home. If she were found (which is now next to impossible), and were brought back by force, she would leave again at the earliest opportunity. It is not only that she fears the hand of justice for a certain clever and daring fraud, of her participation in which you are already aware, and——'

'You are a liar!'

'Time will prove. It is not only this that would prevent her returning. There is another, and what you, at least, would consider a more unforgiveable reason. What I know I know, and am going to tell you just as much as I see fit, and not a scrap more.'

Was the man mad that he went on thus, with that terrible light of sullen wrath burning more and more fiercely in Armitage's eyes?

‘The whole matter now lies in a nutshell, Hew Armitage. Firstly and absolutely, you have seen the last of your wife. Secondly, I happen to be possessed of wholly indisputable evidence to support whatever charges I might make. Thirdly, it is my intention to proclaim these charges, secretly or openly as I may see fit, but none the less surely either way. Fourthly, you can avoid all this scandal and shame by agreeing to buy my silence (and, remember, I am the only person who *knows* anything) at the sum I see fit to ask.’

‘Ha ! ha !’ laughed out Armitage, scornfully ; adding, in a tone of bitter irony, ‘So I was right after all in my estimation of your character. You miserable hound, you can say what you like, but, for your own sake, you had better be cautious what you are about. You hound, you hound ! *you* to have ever known my wife. My God ! it makes me quiver with scorn to look at you. No, Charles Leith,’ he thundered, ‘if that be your name, you have made a false move, and you may throw up your hand !’

‘I do not think I have made a false move,’ replied the latter, in a quiet and perhaps somewhat cowed tone; ‘anyhow, I still hold the highest trumps, and so am bound to gain the game sooner or later.’

This calm, persistent assurance staggered Armitage. The two men stood facing each other silently for nearly a minute, and at last the latter spoke again, and with complete control.

‘And pray what is the sum you are considerate enough to demand?’

‘If you pay me a thousand pounds before noon to-morrow, you are free to put your own construction on your wife’s flight. I am the only person who can definitely prove her dishonour, and, therefore, there can be no fear of the scandal becoming known. Pay me this sum, as I have said, and not only will you never see me again, but I swear within a week I will send you definite information as to Mrs. Armitage’s whereabouts.’

‘And if I do not accede to your modest and delicate proposal?’

‘Then, by heaven, the very beggars in Dundee will know that your wife is a thief, a forger, and a——’

‘Well, you reptile, why do you not finish your sentence?’

‘Are you so *very* sure of your wife’s honour that you can afford gratuitous insults?’

‘I believe in her utter innocence as thoroughly as I believe that you are the most loathsome scoundrel I have ever met!’

‘You fool—so you are really under the impression that *you* are the father of Mona’s child?’

For a moment it seemed as if Armitage was going to fall down in a fit; his body swayed a little, and quivered like that of a beast of prey in furious rage.

‘You lying coward,’ he shouted, hoarsely, springing at Leith with riding-whip high uplifted.

At the same moment the latter drew a revolver from his pocket; there was a flash, an explosion, and a bullet was lodged in the fleshy part of Armitage’s shoulder.

It apparently was nothing more to him than the sting of a wasp. Standing above Leith he brought down the heavy riding-whip with a great slash across the latter's face, and tried to grapple with him, while he simultaneously raised on high the loaded end of the whip. But he reeled like a drunken man, and missed his grasp and blow together, and before he could recover Leith brought down the butt end of the revolver upon his head with a savage crash.

Hew fell in a lifeless heap, and once more there was absolute stillness round lonely Ratho Rise. His antagonist listened intently, then, satisfied that there was no immediate danger, stooped and threw back Armitage's face till the moon lit it up. The blood streamed across it, but the wound in the head was hardly sufficient to cause death; another searching glance convinced him that the bullet had touched no vital part; the only danger was that the unconscious man might either bleed to death or perish from the cold, as he lay helpless.

'What the devil am I to do?' he muttered, perplexedly.

Just then a 'hallo' came from a few hundred yards away.

'Hallo! Mr. Armitage! Is there anything wrong, sir?'

It was Maxwell, who had heard the shot, and whose suspicions had been aroused.

'Ah, that's all right,' muttered Leith; then, hurriedly tearing off a sheet of blank paper from a letter in his pocket, he wrote something upon it, and shoved it into Hew's clenched hand.

The next moment he was on horseback and clattering along the roadway at a furious gallop.

Maxwell evidently heard the latter, for he called out two or three times successively, when, finding that he met with no response, he advanced slowly in the dog-cart. He had almost passed the Rise, when he fancied he saw something dark lying on the turf about forty yards away from the road; alighting, he ran hastily across the intervening space, and to his horror found his master lying there, apparently murdered.

‘Perhaps it’s been a duel,’ he muttered, as his ears caught the last faint echo of the retreating hoofs of Leith’s horse, ‘yet Mr. Armitage was never the man for that kind of tomfoolery, I should have thought. But there’s no knowing what gentlefolks’ll do when they are doited in misfortune, as he’s been of late.’

Stooping, he took Armitage in his arms, and half lifted or dragged him to the dog-cart, wherein it was with the utmost difficulty that he managed to put him. He had driven rapidly for about half-a-mile when a deep groan startled him, and he realised that his master was, at any rate, not dead yet. Hastily drawing the reins he took his own and Armitage’s handkerchiefs and bound up the ugly wound in his head, and then, with his left arm, kept the body in a gentle incline against himself.

Again and again the deep, unconscious groan broke from his master’s lips, and so profuse was the blood that oozed out from his chest, as it appeared to Maxwell, that the latter dreaded Armitage would die in his arms. Would it not be wiser, he thought, to drive to the Cedars

instead of to Firnie Knowe, so that there need be no delay in a medical examination where delay only might be fatal; and suiting the action to his thoughts, he branched off to the right, and in a brief time drew up at the Cedars. Armitage was still unconscious, and was carried into one of the bed-rooms on the ground-floor.

It did not take Dr. Steele, who, though himself unwell, did not hesitate to at once attend to his friend, long to decide that no very material injury had been done—the fear was that fever or inflammation might set in.

‘You have said no word about this yet, have you, Maxwell?’

‘No, Dr. Steele. When I arrived at the Cedars, I simply said that an accident had happened to my master.’

‘That is right; and, to avoid being questioned, you had perhaps better stay here till he comes round, which won’t be long now.’

And truly enough, in a few moments Hew opened his eyes, and gazed vaguely at the doctor and Maxwell; a little later he recognised

them, but was still wholly puzzled, and closed his eyes wearily. When he next opened them it was with recovered memory.

‘Maxwell, what do you know of what happened to-night?’

‘I thought I heard voices, sir, about a quarter-of-an-hour after you had left me—but there was no mistake when I heard a pistol-shot. I waited a bit to see what would follow, and then called out to know if anything was wrong. There was no answer, and I confess I began to get a bit frightened. I thought that perhaps you had been murdered, and that it might be my turn next. I wasn’t a coward long, however, and called out again and again, so, getting no answer, I drove forward, and, just as I came near you, I heard the sound of a horse retreating at full gallop.’

‘Did you see the man who was on the horse?’

‘I saw neither horse nor man, sir.’

‘Did you notice anything else?’

‘There was a piece of paper in your hand, sir, and, thinking it might be something of

value, I took it out and put it in your waistcoat pocket.'

'Thank you, Maxwell, I won't forget the service you've done me. You may go now; but, remember, not a word of this to anyone.'

CHAPTER VIII.

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

AS soon as Maxwell had left the room, Armitage asked Dr. Steele to remove the piece of paper from his waistcoat-pocket and to read what was on it. The doctor had just extracted it when Hew changed his mind, calling out,

‘Excuse me, I’ll read it myself, after all.’

A few words in pencil only, that ran thus :

‘If you have any care for your wife’s reputation, let me hear from you on the terms I mentioned, by to-morrow evening *at latest*, at the “Buccleuch Arms,” Dundee.’

‘You must now compose yourself, Armitage,’ said Dr. Steele. ‘A sound sleep will do you a world of good, and you will waken up with

nothing more than a bad head-ache and a little pain.'

Already the skill of the physician had greatly alleviated Hew's suffering, and under the influence of a composing draught he soon fell into a deep sleep.

'I had meant to have told him to-morrow about Mona's letter, but will have to postpone it for a time. It might end fatally just now;' and, with a sorrowful look in the keen eyes that looked out from the stern, rugged face, Dr. Steele returned to his room.

As the doctor had prophesied, Armitage woke next morning wonderfully well considering all things. An hour passed before anyone came to see if he were yet awake, and during this time he thought out the drift of present circumstances.

He had come to the conclusion that he might serve a double end by acceding to Leith's preposterous request, though, when first his consciousness had returned, and he had dwelt upon the matter, he had without hesitation decided in the negative. Not only would he be able to

stop further scandal about Mona (for he had now determined to let it be publicly known that his wife *had* left home, but to do so with a statement by Dr. Steele to the effect that her brain was affected, and that she was irresponsible for her actions), but he might be able to find out something of her whereabouts by a careful watch being kept on Leith. As for the money, it never entered into his mind to grudge it, if it served his end. After breakfast, he caused a telegram to be sent to the latter, stating simply that 'Mr. Armitage would communicate with Mr. Leith as soon as physically able.' Aware of Armitage's robust physique as Dr. Steele was, he was hardly prepared to find him so well after the events of the previous night. The bullet, however, had only caused an irritating but not dangerous wound, and, though the blow of the pistol-butt had been severe, it had left nothing behind it but a painful bruise that entailed constant headache.

Hew determined not to acquaint Dr. Steele with particulars just at present, for something

warned him (though he would not have allowed this even to himself) that his friend was far from being at his ease on the subject of Mrs. Armitage's flight. So he told him that something had occurred which he would rather not speak about just at present, but which he would explain later on.

The day passed and brought no news of Mona. She seemed to have disappeared as if she had sunk into the earth or melted into the air—for, though once or twice apparent traces of her had been found, they led to nothing. In a letter from Warner, that experienced detective gave it as his opinion that she was either in hiding in some remote place or that she was ill and unconscious, though not in any hospital in Scotland. At the same time, he added, it was possible she had gone south and crossed the Channel, or become lost in London itself. He did not think she had sailed on any long voyage from either any Scottish or English port.

After much thought, Armitage wrote to Leith as follows :

‘SIR,

‘Until within an hour or two ago, I could not have believed it possible that I could have brought myself to communicate with you. It would probably be a matter of regret to you that your murderous attempt had not succeeded, were it not that you would thus have to do without the money you demanded. If ever we meet again, and under circumstances where I hold myself free to act, you will find that I have not forgotten the incidents of last night.

‘Meanwhile, my sole care is for my wife’s reputation. I believe in her innocence in everything as I believe in my religion, but I know how ready the breath of scandal is to blast the purest character. For this, and for this alone, I am willing to treat with you. But regarding you as I do—namely, as an unmitigated scoundrel, it is not likely I am going to hand you over the sum you demand in quite such a ready manner as you suggested. Here are my conditions, which you can accept or not as you please, but from which I will not deviate in the least particular :—

‘1. I will send you, on hearing of your agreement to the following, one hundred pounds in earnest of my promise to ultimately hand you one thousand pounds.

‘2. To allow time for the papers to contradict the scandalous assertions to which they gave expression (possibly on information directly or indirectly supplied by you), and to permit of *the truth* being made public in the way or ways I consider most satisfactory, I name the date of settlement as this day fortnight.

‘3. If by that time Mrs. Armitage should be found, or should herself return, I will still pay you the remainder of the sum agreed upon, but on condition that you leave for Australia or New Zealand for good. (I need not say I use the last words colloquially.)

‘4. Finally, you must hand me at the time of settlement an explicit written statement denying that you know anything detrimental to my wife’s character, and that whatever you may have said to anyone was said under misunderstanding, and absolutely without basis.

‘These are my conditions.

‘I may remark, however, that the game is by no means so much in your hands as you seem to imagine. I have already taken care that if, on receipt of this, you should decide not to wait here any longer, you will not be allowed to leave Dundee, but will at once be arrested by a detective on suspicion of being at least a party to the late forgery on my firm. You forget that your friend, Mr. Murdoch, may have turned against you.

‘I have told the bearer to bring me your answer. If you are agreeable to my terms. I will at once telegraph to the detective in my employment and inform him that no watch need be kept to prevent your leaving Dundee if you so will.

‘HEW ARMITAGE.’

With this message Maxwell went into Dundee by the first train available. It was already dusk when he reached the ‘Buccleuch Arms.’ On asking for Mr. Charles Leith, the waiter requested his name, and returned in a few minutes with the remark that Mr. Leith would see

Mr. Armitage's messenger if he would walk upstairs to No. 30, on the first-floor.

When Maxwell entered the room he at once recognised the gentleman who had dined some months previously at Firnie Knowe. Leith had been walking up and down impatiently, but swung round sharply when the messenger was announced.

Perhaps he suspected some kind of trap, but, after a quick, keen scrutiny, he either recognised the man's face or became satisfied that he was a *bonâ-fide* messenger.

Taking the letter, he opened it swiftly, and a slight flush came into his face when he saw there was no enclosure. The frown on his face deepened as he read on, but, when he came to the concluding portion of the letter, his face grew deadly pale for a moment, but whether with rage or fear Maxwell, of course, could not guess, though he noticed at once the marked change from composure to agitation.

Leaving the room abruptly, Leith disappeared into an inner chamber, and his visitor heard him walking to and fro as if in great per-

plexity. Leith could not make out Armitage's note at all to his satisfaction.

‘How much does he know?’ he muttered, ‘and what does he mean about Murdoch? I know he’s on the wrong scent, but any odd clue might lead to unpleasant consequences. I’d be better out of all this; still, if I could get that thousand out of him, it would both be a nice little revenge and of the utmost importance to me. But what does he mean by saying he would have me arrested? He’s a fool, after all, with all his cleverness; for I suppose it never struck him that I could send an answer in the affirmative and then get slick away immediately after I had received his hundred. Wonder if he’s going to have my movements watched all the same? I don’t like staying in Dundee another fortnight, so I’ll run up to Aberdeen for that period. I know no one there, I think; and if I am followed on the chance of finding me near that errant damsel, it’s some pleasure to reflect that it’ll be a wild-goose chase. As for Murdoch, my good friend Armitage, you played that trump uselessly some time ago, so it’s

rather stale now ; let me see, Murdoch sailed the afternoon before last from Liverpool, so that the telegram from him *viâ* Queenstown is all right. A good job for him if he gets away safe to America, judging from what I know of some recent escapades of his. So he expects to meet me in New York, does he? Blessed are those who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed—and that's your case, my friend. Yes, I think it's safe enough—though, curse him for keeping me waiting, and curse him again and again for this slash across the face, a mark that won't leave me for many a day yet. Well, I'll answer briefly and to the point, simply saying that I agree to his conditions in all things. We'll see who's cleverest in the end, Mr. Hew Armitage.'

When Leith entered the front room again, he was smiling and courteous, though his courtesy made Maxwell uncomfortable, and his smile was more treacherous than ever, almost diabolic, indeed, owing to its accentuation by the livid purple band across the pale face, caused by Armitage's heavy horsewhip.

‘You will give this to Mr. Armitage, please, with my kind regards. Has anything been heard of Mrs. Armitage yet? By-the-by, what is your name? Eh, Maxwell? Well, Maxwell, I’m one of your master’s oldest and best friends, and this trouble of his has quite upset me. What’s thought about it at Firmie Knowe?’

‘Don’t know, sir, I’m sure,’ replied the man, shortly.

‘Ah, look here, have some whisky. It’s a cold day, and you have a good way to get back. What’ll you have?’

‘Nothing, sir, if it’s all the same to you. I’ll take that letter, if you please, and be off.’

‘In a moment. But just tell me first what you have heard as to the opinion held by Mr. Gavin and Dr. Steele.’

‘I don’t know nothing about it, sir, and am not here to answer questions about my master’s private affairs.’

‘Quite right, quite right. But then, you see, I have just been asked by your master to do all in my power to help him solve the

mystery, because he knows I've a natural gift in the detective line, and so it's necessary that I hear all that's been done and thought by other people. Now, if you never yourself heard anything said by Gavin or Dr. Steele, you must have talked it over with the other servants; or, at any rate, you can at least give me your own opinion. I want to put everything down in black and white, so I tell you what I'll do. You tell me everything that happened that you know of, and what your own opinions are, and I will give you a sovereign for your trouble.'

Leith's mingled command and persuasive-ness made Maxwell hesitate a moment, but his almost obstinate sense of loyalty prevented his in any way betraying the trust in him until he had first spoken to his master on the subject.

'It seems to me, sir, that the simplest way would be for you to speak yourself to Mr. Gavin and Dr. Steele, if so be as you're so much interested. As for my giving you an account of what I've noticed myself, I won't say another

word about the matter until I have Mr. Armitage's consent.'

Seeing that nothing was to be got out of the man, Leith's manner changed at once, and became unpleasantly imperative.

'Are you going straight back to Firnie Knowe?'

'I'm going by the first train that's suitable.'

'Have you any other message to deliver in Dundee?'

'If there's time, I may be handing in a message somewhere. The gardener or some one always wants something.'

'What I want to know is, have you any other message to deliver from Mr. Armitage?'

'Well, I'm not sure but what I have.'

'Where to?'

'Oh, it's only some trifling private thing.'

'Has he given you a letter to deliver at the central police-office?'

'If I've time, I'm to look in and see if Mr. Gavin's got any news.'

'Curse your infernal Scotch caution,' cried Leith, losing all control at the man's imper-

turbability. 'Get out of this, and look sharp, or I'll help you downstairs in a way you won't relish. There's the note for your master, and the next time I see him I'll tell him what an insufferable idiot he has in his employment.'

There was a sly twinkle in Maxwell's shrewd eyes as he said, while turning to leave the room,

'Very good, sir ; but Mr. Armitage has a fine heavy horsewhip which you might find handier to use on me at Firnie Knowe than trying to kick me downstairs here ;' and he chuckled as he heard a deep curse follow him as he closed the door.

From the 'Buccleuch Arms' he went to the central police-office, and handed in a letter from Armitage to Gavin, wherein the former requested the detective, or one of his comrades, to keep an eye on Leith's movements and whereabouts for the next fortnight, but not to arrest him or detain him in any way so long as he did not endeavour to leave the country.

‘Who’s this Leith, I wonder, whom he’s suspicious of now?’ the detective muttered, on perusing this note and the appended particulars about the gentleman in question. ‘This has been the most muddled-up case I’ve ever had to do with, for I can get next to no information from Mr. Armitage himself. That his wife is a guilty accessory, to say the least of it, there’s not a shadow of doubt; but what has she done with herself? She’s a clever one, she is. Leith, Leith—well, it’s my private opinion that this is simply a blind on your part, Mr. Armitage, to divert my attention to the wrong quarter. I’ll let Macdonald take this job on hand, and keep myself ready in case anything nearer the mark should turn up. Bother it all, there seems no doubt about it that it *was* Murdoch who sailed in the *Empire* for America; but, so far as can be learned, there’s absolutely no trace of the lady. If she has not sailed before he did, and tries to do so now from any British port, she’ll be nabbed. I only wish she’d try. As for Murdoch, he’ll be caught all right at t’other side. But whether they’ll agree to do

anything more than detain him a bit isn't likely, unless we can definitely accuse him of something criminal. If only they've gone together, the rest will be smooth sailing ; but unfortunately this can hardly prove to be the case. However, we ought to be having a States' telegram here in a fortnight or so.'

In accordance with Armitage's instructions, a man, carefully disguised, was set to watch Leith's movements. On the day following Maxwell's interview with the latter, he received at his hotel a cheque which he asked the landlord to cash or have cashed for him ; and the same afternoon he was traced to the railway station, was observed taking a ticket for Aberdeen, and was duly followed to that city by the disguised constable.

It was with a feeling of relief that Armitage received Leith's acceptance of his conditions. Although at times he was wholly sceptical as to what the latter had told him, or indeed as to his having any knowledge whatever of his wife's reasons for flight and her present whereabouts, at other times he would feel convinced that this

man must know something, that he had probably ascertained directly or indirectly some important data, and that, if he would only be unremittingly watched, he might, unknown to himself, be the means of the discovery of Mona.

Once or twice a great fear had come over him that his wife was where no human search would find her—that her body lay deep in some lonely pool, or swayed about amongst the seaweed—but he became comforted by the lack of all evidence to support this supposition.

With that vain self-conviction with which each of us practises such successful delusion, he said to himself that he *felt* she was still alive, and that they would yet meet, and once more be happy together.

Dr. Steele still remained an invalid, not having quite recovered from the over-exertion he had put himself to on the eventful day of Mrs. Armitage's disappearance; but deeply as Armitage sympathised with him he could hardly understand his old friend's extreme reticence on the subject of Mona. Formerly he had been all affectionate interest, sympathy, and encourage-

ment ; now he said nothing as to his belief that all would yet come right.

For his part, Dr. Steele only said to himself again and again—‘When am I to tell him ? When am I to show him that fatal letter ?’

CHAPTER IX.

A STROKE IN THE DARK.

A WEEK passed, and no news came to render Armitage's trial more bearable, if even by direful certainty. From the letter received from the officer who had followed Leith to Aberdeen, he learned that though that person's movements had often been abrupt and mysterious they had led to nothing as yet. No news from Perth, or Glasgow, or Edinburgh—surely a human being could hardly disappear so thoroughly, especially one such as Mona, burdened and easily recognisable as she was by having her child with her. But had she the child? Perhaps not; and Hew turned faint for a moment as he thought of all the possibilities opened up by such a surmise.

But through all doubt—and this at times was almost overwhelming—through the suspicion of others, the tendency of direct and indirect evidence, he clung to his faith in his wife. His love, always high and noble, now demonstrated its depth of tenderness. Sorrow had softened its nature and more finely attuned it than any unbroken happiness could have accomplished; and, whereas he would some time ago have met the realisation of Mona's perfidy with agonised scorn, he now felt that love such as his could not so easily be slain, that he would love and forgive even to the end.

Never for a moment did he believe in the possibility of her guilt in connection with the forgery; he felt that he would hardly credit it from her own lips. Great love cannot stoop to base suspicion. Mona could do no base act, he felt assured; for in the depth of his faithful and abiding love he would have invented ample excuses for her for simply having left him—he would not have been kind or sympathetic enough, she had loved some one else before she

had met him, and the old magic had asserted its sway; she had been mesmerised by an unprincipled scoundrel; her mind had been affected, and she knew not what she was doing. These and fifty other excuses, if necessary, he would at once have brought forward.

If she only knew, he thought, what agony he was suffering, and how much greater than ever his love had become, she would surely come back to him, or at least send some message. His great hope now was that Mona would be found in some out-of-the-way place, perhaps in a fever, but carefully tended by kindly poor people; and that it would in due time be proved that she had left Firnie Knowe unknowing what she did.

It was with a feeling of almost sickening despair that Armitage watched day after day going past and bringing no news. He had latterly pinned his chief hope on something being found out from close observation of Leith, but by the time the fortnight was almost up he at last realised that he must expect nothing in that quarter. Or rather, he saw that Leith,

consciously or unconsciously, would not let him learn anything if it were possible to prevent it, and that there was no use hoping for anything in this direction until the man was paid the money and left free to act as he pleased.

One morning Hew found among his letters one with the Perth postmark, which he opened with trembling eagerness. It was not, however, from the Intelligence Office, but, to his great surprise, from Leith, and was to the effect that it would be more convenient for him to meet Armitage there than at Dundee. At the last moment Armitage had wisely determined to take Mr. Gavin more into his confidence, and to ask him to undertake the difficult task of keeping Leith in sight after the money was paid and the bargain concluded. This plan he gave up when he learned that the meeting was to be in Perth, deciding to employ one of the Perth detective staff instead.

The appointed hour was noon, and he had just time to catch the late morning train, due in Perth a few minutes before that hour. When within a mile or two of the town, the train was

obstructed for about twenty minutes, so that, to his extreme regret, Hew found he would be half-an-hour late by the time he got to the Royal Hotel. He had meant to have gone first to the Intelligence Department, but now concluded to go straight to the hotel.

‘Yes,’ he was told, ‘Mr. Leith would see him in his private room.’

‘When did Mr. Leith arrive?’

‘Last night, sir, as a guest, though he was here in the forenoon to engage rooms and write a letter.’

‘He’s been here before, hasn’t he?’

‘No, sir, he’s quite a stranger.’

As Armitage followed the waiter he wondered if there was anything of importance underneath this sudden change of the place of meeting, and while still turning the matter over in his mind, he was shown into a room.

Leith rose and bowed with exaggerated courtesy, begging his visitor to be seated. Taking no notice either of the salutation or the request, Hew remained standing, and, before breaking the ice, fixed a long, steady gaze on

Leith's face, under which that gentleman visibly winced.

'I understood, Mr. Leith, that we were to have met on this day at the "Buccleuch Arms" in Dundee?'

'Yes, only I found Perth would be more convenient for me,' replied Leith, in a tone of insulting rudeness.

Hew flushed, but with an effort controlled himself, knowing how much might depend on not further increasing his companion's resentment.

'I will make no remark on your manner of expressing your reason. But I beg that we may at once come to the point. Have you the letter ready which I demanded?'

'That is it there.'

Hew took it up and read it slowly from beginning to end. It was certainly succinctly enough worded, and, so far as Leith was concerned in the scandal, was entirely satisfactory. Stepping to the side of the room he rang the bell.

'What is that for?' asked Leith, abruptly, and with a quick motion of his hand to his side-

pocket, as if about to draw forth some weapon.

‘You need not alarm yourself. I simply desire what you must yourself know to be indispensable—witnesses.’

‘On the contrary, I do not at all recognise the necessity, and emphatically protest against anything of the kind.’

‘It has got to be done, whether you approve or not. You see, Mr. Charles Leith, it is just within the bounds of possibility that you should one day declare this signature of yours to be a forgery, or even to state that it was wrung from you by undue pressure. It might be difficult for me to prove my position, you understand?’

Before any reply could be made, the bell was answered.

‘Waiter, is the landlord or the account-clerk at hand?’

‘The landlord’s in the next room, sir, giving some directions about a gentleman’s luggage.’

‘Then ask him to kindly step here for a moment, and return with him yourself.’

In a minute the paper was duly witnessed by the two men, Armitage having explained that the

gentleman before them had signed this paper in refutation of a baseless scandal, and that, to make the denial more convincing, they had decided to have it witnessed.

As soon as the witnesses had gone, Armitage folded up the letter and put it in his pocket-book.

‘I see you resent this formality, Mr. Leith.’

‘Hand me over the sum agreed on,’ replied the latter, sullenly. Mentally he was cursing his folly in not having first got the money, when he might have played the high hand or not as he liked.

‘One or two questions first, if it’s all the same to you. Be so good as to enlighten me as to what you know concerning Mrs. Armitage’s departure from Firnie Knowe.’

‘You remember meeting me at the cross-roads on the night of your wife’s flight?’

Hew winced at this way of putting it, but replied at once in the affirmative, adding that he did not think Leith had recognised him at the time.

‘Yes, I did, and I also heard you calling out.

But it wasn't likely I was going to stop, was it ?

‘Why not ?’

‘Well, you see, you might have put some awkward questions—and I—ah—let me see—I had an engagement. Moreover, you were going in the right direction—ha, ha !’

‘What do you mean ?’

‘You were going in the right direction—to miss Mona !’

‘By heaven ! if you speak once more thus familiarly of my wife, you will have cause to bitterly regret it.’

‘Oh, we were old friends, you know, before she ever saw you. However, it's all one to me.’

‘Do you mean to tell me that you knew my wife had gone in some other direction than in that of Perth, and that you allowed me to waste such infinitely precious time in vain pursuit ?’

‘Yes.’

‘Charles Leith, you are a base and cruel scoundrel, as well as a liar and coward.’

‘Ah, you've said that or something like it once or twice before, if I'm not mistaken. Try some-

thing new: it might relieve your feelings, and won't hurt me. But when you've done perhaps you will hand me over that money and then take yourself off. You will get no more information out of me further than this—that I happened to come across your wife after she left home, that I learned from her her determination to put an end to herself rather than return to you, and that she is now safely out of this country.'

'Where is she at this moment?'

'Couldn't say. I know she left Scotland, that's all.'

'Charles Leith, you don't leave this room till you give me such information as is in your power. According to agreement, I have brought you the money in notes, but not one of them do you see until you have told me all.'

'This is a breach of faith. I never bound myself to give you details. However, all I can give you will be of little service to you. So I'll give you two links in the chain, and if you can manage to find the end of it, you're welcome.'

'Well?' asked Hew, with uncontrollable eagerness.

‘Firstly—I know that on the same night you went to Perth she went to Leith (the *town* of Leith, ha, ha! curious coincidence that, isn’t it?) and that there she embarked in a steamer which sailed in the early morning for Antwerp. From Antwerp she went to Hamburg. Secondly, within three days from this I will send you word as to where she is at the time I write. Further than this I know nothing myself.’

‘But how are you to hear what her movements are?’

‘That’s my business; but it’s not from her, if that’s what you’re after. It’s nothing now to me whether you find her again or not. You’re welcome, so far as I’m concerned. I promise that you will hear from me in three days. If my informant has lost sight of her, I will give you the latest clue in my possession. I decline absolutely to say another word. For that matter, I couldn’t, unless I were to invent something, because I know nothing more.’

‘Do you swear that you are ignorant of what she is going to do after leaving Hamburg?’

‘She will have left Hamburg before this, but

I am as ignorant as yourself of her intentions or her destination. I swear to send you some information within three days, if I get it myself; if not, I will even let you have the address of my informant, and you can catch up the clue from him if you can.'

'But why——'

'Look here, Hew Armitage, I have neither time nor patience to argue any more on this subject. I tell you frankly that I have no longer such need of the money you have brought me, my difficulties having been tided over. So, if you do not settle with me at once, I will demand back that letter (which as a man of honour you could not refuse), and will retain complete freedom of action as to what I will say or do. One certain result would ensue—namely, the absolute disappearance of even the faintest trace of your wife. I am not going to answer another question, and you may decide as you choose. Which is it to be?'

For reply Armitage silently laid on the table a thick bundle of notes, which Leith took up and counted carefully.

‘I have one word to say. Charles Leith, if you are playing me false, you will yet have bitter cause to rue it. But—but,’ and here Armitage struggled with his passion, ‘if I find that my wife has come to shame or sorrow through you, I will follow you to the ends of the earth, and kill you without respite whensoever and wheresoever I may find you. Man,’ he went on, wildly, ‘it is since you first came on the scene that all this unhappiness began. According to the evil you have done, may God do unto you!’

‘Oh, I’ll take my chance,’ sneered Leith, mockingly, ‘and so now I will wish you good-day, and—*good-bye*, Mr. Hew Armitage.’

An hour later, by Hew’s directions, messages were flashed along the wires to Hamburg, Antwerp, and other North-Sea ports, for a sudden hope had come to him that he might forestall any treachery by Leith, and that the German or Belgian detectives might be able to find Mona, either in some town, or at the moment of embarkation. He never realised that Leith may have lied to him from first to last.

Before returning to Firmie Knowe, he arranged that a detective should follow the latter and report daily.

It was already growing dark, though not long after three o'clock, when Leith settled his bill at the 'Royal Hotel' and drove to the railway station. A short time before, the detective had seen him go out, and had followed him to the Bank of Scotland, and had noticed him change a large bundle of Scotch for English notes and gold. If he imagined that Leith was unconscious of his presence he was mistaken, for the latter, who had fully expected that such surveillance would be instituted, had kept a careful look-out, and soon discovered that he was followed. It did not, however, discompose him, and he certainly did not exhibit the least symptom of uneasiness.

When he reached the station, it was just as the express for the south arrived, so there was little time to spare. He did not look behind him as he stood at the ticket office, but he could not help smiling as he knew who the person just behind him was, and what his reason was for pressing so close to him.

‘First single to Edinburgh,’ he said to the booking-clerk, in a loud and distinct voice, adding, ‘How long will this give me in Edinburgh before the night mail leaves there for London?’

‘About three hours, sir.’

‘Ah, that will suit me nicely,’ and, still smiling furtively, Leith ensconced himself in one of the Edinburgh carriages.

Putting his head out of the window and hailing a paper boy, he noticed that his follower was getting into a third-class compartment in the same carriage as himself. At the first station at which the train stopped he rose and looked out, and by a coincidence his follower had also risen, and was also looking out. Larbert Junction had to be passed, and then there were no more stoppages till Edinburgh was reached. When the train drew up at the former, the detective got out, and strolled past the compartment in which Leith was seated, his mind being put at ease by observing that the latter was apparently sound asleep.

‘That’s all right,’ he muttered, as he got back to his own compartment just as the train

was again in motion; and 'that's all right,' said Leith, as he found himself alone, his previous fellow-traveller having got out at Larbert.

The moment the train stopped at the Haymarket Station for the collection of tickets, the detective kept a close watch on the door of the compartment in front of him. A gentleman got in, the ticket-collector closed the door, and three minutes later the terminus was reached. The train had not come to a stop ere the detective was on the platform, keeping close to the compartment into which he had seen Leith deposit himself. Some one got out—not the person whom he wanted; but why did the latter not come forth? Was he still sleeping? Advancing to the window, a glance was sufficient to show that the compartment was empty!

'Gone, by all that's living,' cried the amazed officer. 'Why, he must have got out of the train immediately after it left Larbert. Wait a minute! By Jove, it may be!' and, turning, he went swiftly in the direction of the cabs. He

was just in time to see the person who had left Leith's compartment get into a hansom.

‘Yes, the same height and build. A man that can disguise himself like this would make his fortune as a detective;’ and, in full assurance that he had got his man safely after all, he sprang into another hansom, and told the driver on no account to lose sight of number so-and-so.

As the vehicles rumbled up through the old town, and away through Nicolson Street, the detective again and again chuckled over Leith's adroitness and at his over quick-wittedness; but he again was to be somewhat astonished when Morningside on the right and Newington on the left were passed, and they went swiftly down-hill to Powburn.

At the last-named place the hansom came to a stop, and the passenger got out, saying he would take a short cut to his house across the meadows. It was impossible for the latter not to notice the hansom behind him, and it evidently struck him that some friend was seeking him out.

Coming up to the detective, who had been thus awkwardly found in pursuit, he saw at once that the latter was no acquaintance, but politely asked if he could direct him, perceiving as he did that he was a stranger.

‘No, thank you, sir; much obliged, I’m sure; but I’m going to see a friend down the road a bit. Alighted here to save the extra sixpence, you know.’

‘I see. Good evening.’

Turning to the driver of the first hansom, the detective asked if he knew the person he had been driving.

‘To be sure I do. Everyone here knows him. He’s Mr. Hillyer, the famous advocate, and that’s his property over there, called the Grange. It wasn’t Mr. Hillyer ye was a-wantin’, I suppose?’

‘No, no! thanks. I only wanted to know who he was,’ and, jumping into his own cab again, he told the driver to lose no time in getting back to Edinburgh. ‘What a curs’d fool I’ve been,’ he muttered, with impartial

severity. 'He's given me the slip after all, confound him. Wonder what the deuce he *has* done. Did he get out at Larbert, and go to Glasgow ; or did he go south to catch up the early evening London express ; or did he get out shortly before we reached the Haymarket Station ? I fancy the last must be the truth. I expect he has something he must settle up in Edinburgh, and that as soon as he has done this he'll disguise himself and go on to London, as he intended. He must have suspected something. I'll telegraph to Glasgow and London as well, and see if I can learn anything along the line beyond Haymarket.'

While the detective was anathematising his ill-fortune, and laying out many plans for regaining the scent, Leith was standing on the pier at Greenock waiting to be taken over to a sailing vessel that was in readiness to leave the Tail of the Bank as soon as the last passenger was on board.

The moment the train had steamed out of Larbert Junction Leith had crossed to the other

side of the carriage, unlocked the door by a key he carried evidently on purpose, closed it as he stood on the platform, but at first hesitated to risk a spring on to the sloping bank. Seeing, however, that every moment the engine was increasing its speed, he half-fell, half-threw himself backward, and rolled sprawlingly along the grassy incline none the worse of his daring feat save a torn nail on one of his fingers and a bruise on the thigh. Losing no time, he at once ran along the embankment, skirted a high double-fence of young ashes and larches, and saw before him the high-road without a sign of life. Hiding himself behind a bend of the hedge whence he could see all around him, he made a careful scrutiny to see that he had not been noticed and followed, when, having satisfied himself, he crossed the road, and with some difficulty, owing to the bruise he had received, swung himself by a trailing bough into a great beech. Before he had mounted it half-way he saw what he wanted. Far away to the right rose the white smoke of the engine, showing that his risky leap had not been

noticed, or, if it had, that the train was not to be stopped in consequence, and that no telegram could be sent till Edinburgh was reached. As soon as he gained the ground again he looked at his watch, and saw that he was still in time to get the train at Larbert Junction which would take him west. Taking from his pocket a small parcel, he soon, by means of a false beard and wig, completely altered his appearance, and immediately thereafter went rapidly along the road in the direction of the station, arriving just in time to get into a through carriage for Greenock.

It had come on to rain heavily, and the wind rose and shook the rushing train at times as if it would hurl it from the rails. Above the noise of the wheels and the jolt of the carriages could be heard its mournful sough, rising into a blast like a prolonged howl of fury; and the engine-drivers had difficulty in keeping their faces from laceration by the sleet that every now and again whirled against them. Lying back against the cushions Leith grew ill at ease as the wind increased in violence, and he turned

away his face from the window as if more effectually to shut out some unpleasant thoughts.

‘It will be a wild night at sea,’ he muttered. ‘I don’t half like it, and yet anything would be better than not getting away to-night. Let me see—the wind’s almost due north, and so will be entirely in our favour. That’s a good thing: no hanging about the firth windbound for a week, but slick away and well down the Irish Sea before dawn. She sails at eight, so I expect I’ll be about the last passenger aboard.’

In due time Leith reached Greenock, but found on gaining the pier that he was too late for the small tug that had taken the other passengers aboard. A man offered to take him out in another tug for a sovereign, an offer which he gladly enough accepted, as the sea was already too high for any small boat to venture on it with safety, and as, moreover, there was not a moment to lose, the tide being already at the turn.

He had barely gained the deck of the *Australasian* when the anchor was up, and the great

ship swung slowly from her moorings, and was dragged easily after the steam-tug that was to conduct her past the Cloch Lighthouse and then leave her to begin her long journey to the other side of the world.

Before the pilot left the vessel he offered, according to custom, to take ashore any letters or telegrams. Leith had a note already written ; addressed to 'Hugh Armitage, Esq., Finnie Knowe, by Dundee.' When he handed this to the pilot (and he was the sole passenger who took advantage of the latter's offer), he gave him a sovereign, on condition that he would not fail to have the letter posted on the evening of the following day. As he leaned on the little sofa in his cabin, he pressed his face against the round porthole which did duty as a window, and caught a glimpse of the rising sea in the intervals between the surging up of each successive wave. His face was very pale, and became almost ghastly in the wan light thrown suddenly across it by each mass of white foam that rushed past. But before he turned to enter the saloon his old evil smile flickered

about his mouth, for he was saying to himself, 'I'm in luck, indeed ; over a thousand pounds in hand, and knowledge that I am fully revenged. Certain revenge ; how I'll brood over that every day of this voyage ! Curse you again and again ! Yes, Hew Armitage, you will wish, two days hence, that you had left your horse-whip behind you that night. I'm a scoundrel, a reptile, am I ? Perhaps—but I've had my revenge, Hew Armitage.'

Out into the darkness and the storm-swept sea went the labouring ship, no soul thereon knowing whether unto life or unto death.

CHAPTER X.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

ARMITAGE thought the two days after his interview with Leith would never pass; for he clung with a great hope to the latter's promise.

On the evening of the second day he received three letters, each one of which was like another stab in a sorely wounded body. One was from Gavin to say that no trace of Mrs. Armitage could be found in Hamburg, Antwerp, or elsewhere, and reiterating the writer's belief that nothing would now be heard until after the arrival of the ship in which Murdoch had sailed. With an imprecation Hew thrust this into the fire.

The second note was from the Perth office enclosing the report of the detective who had followed Leith from that town. To his intense chagrin, Armitage found that the latter had eluded all pursuit with apparently the utmost ease, and that he had left absolutely no traces behind him. This letter discouraged and worried him greatly, and more and more the further he thought the matter over.

The third letter was from Dr. Steele, and was very short. It ran simply :

‘MY DEAR FRIEND,

‘I have something to tell you which I can no longer postpone doing. It is not good news, my poor boy, but you must be brave.’

Strangely enough this last note did not disturb Hew so much as the other. He well knew that Dr. Steele no longer believed in his wife’s integrity, but it never entered into his mind that he had any other cause therefor than Gavin’s prejudiced reasoning. A coolness had

arisen between them, for Armitage could not help feeling bitterly disappointed that his old friend should doubt Mona on even the most startling evidence. Wearied out as he was, he slept badly that night, and was up an hour before the darkness grew into a cold chilly grey.

He had meant to have ridden over to Firnie Station in order to get Leith's expected note a little sooner than he would by waiting at home, but, now that the time was at hand, he felt a strange reluctance to anticipate what news the letter might bring him.

As a rule, the postman rode up to the lodge a good half-hour before the breakfast time at Firnie Knowe, but on this morning he was late.

Hew kept pacing up and down the room, unable to touch anything on the table, and at last began to despair, as he concluded that Leith must have played him false. At this moment he heard the sound of wheels in the avenue, and a little later Dr. Steele drove up in his small phaeton.

Hew went to the door and welcomed him politely if not cordially. His visitor noticed this and sighed.

‘I came over early to see you, Hew, in case you should think of going into Dundee to-day. As I told you in my note, I have something to tell you.’

‘I am ready to hear what you have to say,’ replied Armitage, gravely; ‘but can you first tell me if you saw the postman as you came along?’

‘Yes, I did, and, as he told me there was only one letter for you this morning, I brought it with me. Here it is.’

‘Thank you. Excuse me for a little,’ said Hew, with tremulous eagerness. ‘Pray have some breakfast while I go into the library. This note is of the utmost importance.’

As soon as he gained the library, he tore open the envelope, not without noticing, however, to his surprise, that the postmark was that of Greenock.

A mist swam before his eyes, and for a few moments he could not see, but by an effort he

steadied himself, and read the brief letter through.

‘HEW ARMITAGE,

‘By the time you receive this, Mona and I will be far at sea *en route* for Australia. Do not be anxious about our means of subsistence, for, in addition to the thousand pounds I have received from you, she has brought with her in gold another large sum. The same friend of mine who gave her shelter when she left your house, and kept her safe and quiet till after the first flurry was over, has given us a passage on board one of his vessels. Though there are no other passengers, I do not think she will ever regret having left you or having accompanied

‘Your humble servant,

‘CHARLES LEITH.

‘P.S.—I need hardly say that what I told you in Perth was all bunkum. Mona and I had a good laugh over it afterwards. By-the-by, the child’s dead.’

Though the colour ebbed slowly from Armitage's face as he read this dastardly note, he certainly did not take it all in during the first reading. He turned it over and looked at it with a strange, puzzled look in his eyes, a look which gradually became intensified in a sustained stare of agony. If ever despair, if ever overwhelming misery burned in any mortal's eyes, it was in those of Hew Armitage, as with a low cry he realised at last the awful thing that had come to him.

He stood still, staring at the paper; his frenzied eyes moveless in the drawn, bloodless face. His body swayed, and he sank helplessly down beside a low chair. He lay thus in a kind of stupor of agony, and apparently was entirely unconscious of Dr. Steele's anxious inquiry outside the door, and subsequent entry. When the latter entered, he got a great shock. Was it possible that any blow, any shock, could so terribly prostrate and alter a man of such calibre as Hew Armitage; for he lay there as if he had aged pathetically, helpless, hopeless, a man already aged.

Looking at the helpless, almost abject-

looking being before him, Dr. Steele recognised that the one chance of saving Armitage from death—or worse, madness—was to rouse him into activity at whatever cost. He read Leith's note, which, of course, only more thoroughly convinced him of Mona's guilt; if he *could* have held out any hope, he would have done so, and persuaded his friend to be up and away in swift pursuit of the traducer. But under the circumstances all he could do was to make Hew realise to the full that Mona was unworthy—and that he owed it to himself as a man not to yield to such extremity of grief.

But he spoke apparently to deaf ears, Hew either regarding him with a dull vacant stare, or paying no attention whatever.

At last Dr. Steele half-pulled, half-lifted him on to the chair, ran into the morning-room and brought out some brandy, forcing thereafter some of the liquid down Armitage's throat. It seemed to touch the springs of life, for some faint colour came into his drawn white face, and

his eyes lost something of their fixed, glassy stare.

‘Armitage!’

‘Well?’ came back the answer, in a strange, muffled voice.

‘Hew, my friend, my poor boy, I know what you are suffering, for I know your dreadful secret. Do not restrain your grief; no man need be ashamed of tears in a great sorrow.’

‘Well?’ in the same dull, harsh, monotonous tone.

‘You must not give way to unmanly despair; you must realise that you have been deceived—grossly, shamefully deceived.’

‘Curse him! curse him! curse him!’

‘It is not *he* alone. My boy, my boy, I am sorry for you, but you must read this note;’ and Dr. Steele placed before him the note he had found on the dressing-table on the day Mona had left.

‘I did not give it to you before, but kept it in the vain hope that something would bring her back, or that you would find her.’

To Dr. Steele’s almost startled amazement,

Hew sprang to his feet and was once more a man, as of old. Changed he was, indeed, marked as with the drawn lines of age and the veritable lines of agony, but no longer stricken, helpless, impotent.

Taking the note from Dr. Steele, he read it aloud in a clear and firm voice.

‘It is a lie ; it is a forgery !’

‘Do you mean to say, Hew, that that is not your wife’s handwriting?’

‘I mean to say that, if she wrote that note, it was unknowing what she did. It is only possible for me to believe two things—either that she wrote it in mental frenzy, or that she was forced to do so against her will by magnetic force.’

‘And who would exercise such a force?’

‘Charles Leith.’

‘But you have no manner of proof that he, in the first place, possesses the powers of a mesmerist at all, and, in the second, none that Mona ever proved susceptible to such influences.’

‘If Mona wrote these words it is *impossible*

to account for the fact by any other supposition. Listen to me, Steele. If ever you hint to me of my wife's imaginary guilt in the matter of the forgery, it will be the last time we speak to each other. But I tell you again that I do not believe this document to be genuine. The writing is almost identical with that of my wife, but yet there is an indefinite something about it which assures me that it is not hers.'

'Armitage, at the risk of losing your friendship, I must tell you that I can see *no* difference, and that I believe any expert would bear me out. Have you any writing of hers that we could lay the two together?'

'You will find endorsements and remarks on the backs of some of the household bills in the escritoire in the morning-room. Follow me.'

When the escritoire was opened, Hew pointed to the portion which Mona had used for her accounts. Dr. Steele pulled out some tied-up bundles, and as he did so a note fluttered to the ground. Stooping, he glanced through it

hastily, and suddenly asked Armitage if he had not looked at this compartment since his wife's departure.

‘No; why do you ask?’

‘Read this.’ And Hew, snatching the piece of paper, read the following message :

‘This is to tell you that for my sake, for our child's sake, for your own honour and reputation, you must let the matter of the forgery rest. Hew, I am guilty and I alone. I tell you this, because I know that we shall never meet again. If you can forgive me, do so—but, better still, forget me.’

‘Is that Mona's handwriting or not?’

Armitage hesitated, and then admitted that he could not say wherein it was not, but added that it was a strange thing why the ink was of a markedly different hue from that in which the other endorsements and notes appeared.

‘Do you not see how this bears me out, Steele? Granting that Mona did write these words, the fact of their being in a different ink and on a different kind of paper from what she invariably used proves that she must have

written it *away* from Firnie Knowe, and, therefore, as I am convinced, under evil mesmeric influence.'

'What you say is certainly strange, and there may be something in it. What are you going to do?'

'Do? There is but one thing to do. I will go at once to Glasgow (for that scoundrel's remark about sailing from London is a manifest blind), and will find out what ship he sailed in, and who were the other passengers. If indeed my poor, unfortunate darling should have been seduced and led away by that fiend, I will follow them. If I cannot save her happiness, or my own, I can at any rate even yet save her honour, and rescue our child, for I do not believe that the little one is dead. If she *had* died, the shock would have restored Mona to her right mind, if she is indeed distracted, or it would have broken the mesmeric thrall exercised by Leith, if it is to his treacherous wiles she owed her misery. And if—my God! *if* I find that I am too late—that Mona has sunk under her burden—then I will follow him from

country to country, from place to place, till at last God gives him over into my hands. There will be no escape for him *then* !'

'Armitage, you must not act rashly about going to Australia. Reflect a moment. What if Leith is deceiving you again as he deceived you before? It is possible he is as ignorant as any of us concerning Mona's whereabouts, and that he is only endeavouring to have his revenge by causing you as much suffering as it is in his power to do.'

But evidently upon Hew's mind had become branded the belief that Mona had succumbed to Leith's mesmeric powers, and had been led away against her will—had been forced to write these notes, and was even now, perhaps, sinking under the shame and agony which she yet found impossible to overcome.

'My resolve is fixed, Steele; but, of course, I will not sail until satisfied that I am not pursuing a mere idea.'

Action saved Hew Armitage. Had it not been for his sudden resolve his brain would have given way, or he would have died, perhaps by

his own hand. The very strength of his nature induced such an extremity of collapse. A less trustful, less loyal, less passionate nature might have stood the first shock better, but at the deadly blow that had been struck it seemed to Hew as if *everything* was gone—not only happiness, honour, welfare, but also hope in man, belief in good, trust in Divine power. The world became a horrible chaos of darkness, treachery, evil, mockery, agony, through all washing incessantly a perpetual rain of tears.

As the train that day whirled him towards Glasgow, an acquaintance got into the same compartment at some small station, but the latter did not recognise Armitage, whom he knew well but had not seen for some months.

On reaching the smoky city, Hew roused himself from his profound reverie, wherein a deadly grief had brooded like a chilling vapour in a sunless valley. He went to the leading shipping-agents, inquired what vessel or vessels had sailed for Australia within the last week, and

learned that only one ship had gone, a well-known trader called the *Australasian*, owned, in company with two or three other large vessels, by Messrs. Peacock & Co. To this firm he at once went, and was informed that no one bearing the name of Charles Leith had registered with them, but that a Mr. Charles had, on the day of sailing, engaged a berth by telegram, and had reached the ship just in time and no more. By further inquiry he also ascertained that the telegram was sent from Mr. Charles, at the 'Royal Hotel,' Perth, and that a telegraphic reply in the affirmative was sent to him there. He had engaged *one* berth only. It was in vain that Armitage strove to discover if Mona had sailed or not. A Mrs. Browne, who described herself as a married woman going out to join her husband, was a second-class passenger, but she had no child; there was also a young widow named Robinson, who had a baby with her, and went out in the steerage; and there were two married ladies, belonging to the saloon, who were travelling by themselves, and who

had given no unasked-for details. No, neither had children; yes, both called at the office at the same time; yes, one was young and very pretty, and seemed in great distress; no, he (the clerk) had not heard them say anything particular, beyond overhearing the elder lady whisper to the other to be of good heart, because it was all for the best.

‘But what did the younger lady give as her address?’

‘She declined to give any, sir; and, seeing that she was in trouble, I did not press her. She paid the passage-money in full, and got all particulars, and I saw no more of her.’

Armitage returned to the hotel where he had engaged a room, and there he found a telegram from his business agent in London, informing him that no ship had sailed therefrom within the last six days, and that the first to go was the *Fair Hope*, due to sail two days hence. In due time he also received a telegraphic reply from the proprietor of the ‘Royal Hotel’ at Perth, stating that Leith was the only person who had left on the day in question, and that that morn-

ing he (Leith) had received a telegram addressed to Mr. Charles, which he had beforehand explained to the proprietor was his professional name, he being an actor.

Finally, Hew went to Greenock and got what information he could from the pilot who had steered the *Australasian* out of the firth; information which corroborated the certainty as to Leith and 'Charles' being the same person, but which afforded not the faintest clue to Mona. However, he felt convinced that she was on board the ship in question, and was one of those persons whom the clerk had mentioned. But if he had any lingering doubts they were removed when he paid a second visit to Messrs Peacock's office, and learned two important things: firstly, that the clerk had made a mistake in saying both the two lady cabin-passengers were married women, for the younger and prettier was registered as Miss Marshall; and, secondly, that some unforeseen accident must have prevented the other lady, Mrs. Colquhoun, from sailing, for the ship had had to leave without her, and they had neither received nor sent

any communication owing to the absence of an address.

‘I see it all,’ thought Hew, as he walked away—‘that devil in human shape has persuaded some one he knew that Mona was either his wife or his sister, or perhaps even an orphan girl engaged to him, and that she was to be sent out to friends in Australia, where he would shortly join her. Some such scheme as this, I am certain, has been carried out. But I will follow and save her.’

Within the next two days, Armitage had made all arrangements for departure. The head clerk in his firm was made a junior partner, the servants at Firnie Knowe were paid off, with the exception of the gardener and his wife, the latter of whom had been, twenty years ago, one of the servants in the Cameron household, and in later days a kind of housekeeper, and in full charge of the house Mrs. Muir was now left. With Dr. Steele he had a sad but friendly farewell, the former comforting his deep regret at what he thought Hew’s folly by the reflection that the latter

might, in action like this, more effectually shake off his great sorrow. Mr. Gavin was disgusted, maintaining that any moment news of essential importance might come from America, to which remonstrance Armitage paid no heed, as he knew how absolutely the detective was on the wrong scent.

Besides the large amount in gold and notes which he took with him, in addition to drafts on Melbourne agents, he took nothing of importance except a gold case containing a miniature portrait of his wife which she had given him on the first anniversary of their marriage.

No ship sailed from Glasgow for some time, so he decided to go by the *Fair Hope*, from London, a swift vessel, which in all probability would reach Melbourne before the *Australasian*, despite the latter's good start. The name also appealed to him, and he looked on it as an augury. The stronger the emotion, the more liable is human nature to seize on the veriest trifles as indices to either good or evil.

He reached London late the night before the

ship sailed, and the next morning stood on the poop watching Gravesend fading away as the vessel was towed steadily onward till the South Foreland should be passed.

The white cliffs and the picturesque castle of Dover were the last objects he saw, for a dense mist crept seaward from the shore and hid everything from view. The wintry dusk had set in, and it was bitterly cold; but Armitage seemed indifferent to the gloom of the former or to the chill of the north-easter. He stood leaning against the taffrail, not with a shoreward but with a seaward gaze.

He was already imagining that the *Fair Hope* was eager to reach the far away Austral coast, and fervently he prayed that the augury of the name might not prove a mockery.

At last he felt chilled to the bone, took one long look at the black seas sweeping round the ship, and went to his cabin.

Even as the *Fair Hope* was rushing down Channel before a strong favouring wind, beginning well her long race of thousands of miles over many seas, a telegram was delivered at Firnie

Knowe addressed to Hew Armitage. According to agreement, it was at once despatched to the Cedars.

Dr. Steele opened it hurriedly, and grew white with keen sorrow as he read its contents.

‘Too late,’ he cried, ‘too late! He will be far at sea by this time. My God! what evil chance has played such havoc with these two lives!’

CHAPTER XI.

WHITHER ?

ON the eventful day when Mona left home, it will be remembered that she, the child, and a house-girl had gone forth in the phaeton, and that at a certain point Mrs. Armitage had told the servant to get out and return home. Having given her command, and seen the girl wistfully standing on the road, she shook the reins and drove swiftly onward for a considerable distance. That she had some definite idea no one who could have then seen her would have hesitated to decide, though such an one would have been puzzled to see her a few minutes later draw the reins tight, stop the pony, and sud-

denly take the baby in her arms and kiss it passionately, speaking to it the while with broken sobs and with burning tears trickling down her sad face.

‘My darling, my darling! he shall not kill you!’ she sobbed; ‘no, he shall never find us; and, if he does, he will have to kill us both, and not you, my pearl, my little angel!’

This, then, was the secret of Mona’s flight—a horrible hallucination whereby it seemed to her that her husband had determined to destroy their child. By what strange mental freak this idea had become fixed in her mind it is impossible to say, but somehow or other the suspicion took seed in her excited mind—perhaps during her brain-fever, and in some extraordinary way grew more and more definite, till to her it became a terrible reality—a reality at last so imminent and awful that it had become intolerable.

No doubt this dreadful hallucination was the result of the shock she had received from the carriage accident, the concussion of the brain from which she suffered, and the

fever which had afterwards prostrated her ; but below it all there must have been some strain of mental disease—a strain possibly so slight that it would never have manifested itself in even any little eccentricity had it not been for these untoward incidents. Before the fall from the carriage had occurred, Dr. Steele's attention had been arrested by some little things to which his keen professional judgment at once attached considerable significance—so much so that, as may be remembered, he went the length of inquiring as to the mental health of Mona's parents and immediate relations.

But if Dr. Steele could have seen the strange, puzzled look that occasionally came into her eyes as she sat in her phaeton during this momentous drive he would have taken heart, believing that strong as the hallucination was at present it would ere long pass away, if not leaving the mind clear, at least permitting the latter to shape itself into a new and possibly less tragic groove.

Suddenly Mona loosened the reins again, and

called out an encouraging cry to the pony, driving rapidly forward till she came to the cross-roads, along one of the least used of which she drove until the North Grasston Road was reached. Here she alighted, and, taking with her only her child and a small hand-bag into which she had before leaving hastily thrust some notes and gold, she crossed the road and climbed up the bank that hemmed in this side of the Forest of Ratho. Just before penetrating the gloomy darkness made by the firs, larches, and gaunt oaks and beeches, she stood a moment or two intently listening: either she heard, or imagined she heard, distant sounds which, to her excited mind, became the clamour of pursuit.

Shudderingly she entered the wood and wandered swiftly but aimlessly through it. Once a fox rustled through the covert behind her, and in a moment she fell on her knees and cried out wildly for some one to save her child, and, when no response came, sank forward in a prayer of intensest thankfulness that she and her little one had been screened from the

avenging hand which she believed was so closely following them. After long, aimless wandering, and when just about to sink down in a stupor of mingled exhaustion and despair, she caught a glimpse of an open road a short distance in front of her. She had just reached the utmost limit of Ratho Wood when she saw the hooded cart of a carrier coming along in her direction, and at once made up her mind to take advantage of this opportunity. She had had a well-defined plan before leaving Firnie Knowe, but all her arrangements had by this time escaped her memory.

When the carrier drew near, he was startled at the sudden apparition of a closely-veiled woman issuing from the cheerless gloom of the fir-woods, and still more so when this lady (for that she was a lady he at once knew from her accent and low-pitched voice) begged that she might have a passage in his cart.

‘How far do you go?’ she asked.

‘Weel, mem, I gang the length o’ Perth; but I dinna gang there the nicht, ye ken. I’m

due at Drumlouthie at somewhaur atween five and six, and I don't start again till about half-past six next morning, getting into Perth sometime afore noon, according to the extent of my custom.'

'Is there a railway station at Drumlouthie?'

'Ay, there is that. But, if ye're in a hurry, mem, I should advise ye to tak' the train frae Mitchell Junction. I'll be passing within half-a-mile o't, and I'm thinkin' I'll be in good time for ye to get the south train that's due at Perth shortly after four.'

After Mona had got into the carrier's cart, the conversation did not flourish. The carrier made several attempts, but was met either with silence or with quiet monosyllabic replies.

She sat in a kind of dream, sometimes keeping the baby to her breast and singing a low tune to hush its fretfulness; again, she would suddenly snatch it away from her bosom and gaze at it long and earnestly, as if striving to solve some riddle. Sitting, as she did, behind the

carrier, he saw nothing of this, and, indeed, gradually came to think of other things than his silent fellow-traveller. At last Mona was aroused by the stoppage of the clumsy vehicle, and, turning to her, the carrier said that her road branched off here, and that she could not miss the way, as it led straight to Mitchell Junction.

She had alighted, and was feeling for her purse, when the kind-hearted old fellow leaned forward and said in a whisper, as if there might be tell-tale ears in the very hedge-row,

‘Look here, mem, you seem in trouble, if you’ll excuse my noticing it. If so be as ye’re hard put to it for money, why, we’ll say nae-thing aboot this ride, but I’ll just wish ye guid-nicht and God-speed.’

‘Thank you, my friend, and God reward you for your kindly thought. Though I am in sore trouble, I am in no lack of money. But will you do me a service?’

‘What I can dae, I’ll dae, mem.’

‘Well, here is a pound-note, to which you

are welcome, if you will say nothing about having seen me. I tell you frankly that I have left my home, but it is not for evil I have done so.'

'I believe that is the truth, mem.'

'A search will soon be made for me, and I tell you that if you betray me the blood of myself and my child will be on your head. My husband is determined that my baby must not live, and if he kills her he will be the cause of my death also.'

The man seemed impressed by her earnestness, but in any case he took the money and gave his promise, which he loyally enough kept till long afterwards.

Mona reached the station in time to catch the train from Aberdeen to Glasgow. In the compartment she fell into a profound sleep and did not awaken till her journey was nearly at an end.

It was dark when she left the terminus at Glasgow, but the outer darkness was as nothing compared with that which clouded her mind. For now all was confusion, wild images succeed-

ing tumultuous hopes and numbing fears, a dreadful desire to fly away into some remote place where no human being could ever espy her alternating with an equally dread eagerness to participate in the noise and tumult of the great city. She knew not whence she had come nor whither she was going. A strange, indefinite fear urged her to move on, to mix with the crowds, to seek safety in these thronging thousands that made Argyle Street seem like the main approach to some great hive, whereto and wherefrom countless swarms continually passed.

She had left the station quickly, and was at once submerged in the dense and fast-flowing human stream, and even as a broken flower is swept along by some current, so was she carried eastward in the direction of the Tron-gate as if she had no volition of her own. What noise there was, what glare of lights, what brutal faces and brutal words and brutal laughter, what evil and hollow mockery of gaiety, what drunkenness, what loathsome and omnipresent vice. In the midst of this human

maelstrom, Mona felt as if she were in some dreadful nightmare.

Past the crowded Trongate her feet had aimlessly borne her, with her one wild desire to escape, to hide, to be at rest.

Now close beside her ran the river, though as yet she knew it not : dark and foul and mysterious, brilliant here and there with gas illuminations and red ship-lights, it was like a materialised shadow of the human stream that seethed and bubbled and surged upward and downward till the eye saw no further, eastward or westward.

At the corner of Argyle Street and Jamaica Street she eddied to and fro some moments, even as the human currents caught her and bore her this way or that. Was it fate or accident that determined her tendency ? For, all unconsciously, she turned in the direction of the Broomielaw Bridge, and in a short time was among the thronging crowd that continually pass to and fro thereon. Once there, once she had seen the dark water flowing beneath, the attraction of the great river exercised a spell

over her more potent than any weak volition of her own, or even than the indeterminate force of the crowds about her. Along one side of it, then back by the other, so went Mona. She seemed to feel no fatigue, though at times she lingered by some jutting lamp, nor did she seem to have any fixed idea. Perhaps in her obscured mind the river suggested some protective influence. Possibly she had some vague idea that in it was to be found rest, freedom from pursuit, assured safety; but more possibly it was to her simply what the flame is to the moth, a focus of irresistible attraction.

Two or three times a policeman told her that she must not linger, but he was a kindly man, and neither molested her in any way nor spoke to her again when he found that she uncomplainingly walked on. Later on, the man who replaced him said to her harshly that she must not beg on the bridge, at which she only stared at him, with a dumb, wondering expression. Some one heard the admonition, and, pitying the hopeless misery of the woman, gave her a

small silver coin, which she took without thanks, and with the same dull, dazed look. The night wore on, and Mona still kept on or near the bridge. Gradually, to her ears, the river's murmur became coherent, and seemed to be a constant whispering of *rest—rest—rest*.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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